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OR,

The Dead Straight Trail.

The Romance of a Colorado Camp.

BY GEO. C. JENKS,
AUTHOR OF "SLEEPLESS EYE," "THE GIANT
HORSEMAN," "GIT-THAR OWNEY," "THE
DEMON DOCTOR," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

RED BILL'S UNEXPECTED DEFENDER.

"Squire, you're a dandy! That's what yer are! It's ther best story I've heerd in over a year. Put her thar, 'Squire; put her thar!"

The speaker was a burly miner, a man whose powerful frame, rough hands and heavily-bearded face was in keeping with the careless garb that hung on him by a belt around his waist, and nothing else. He looked as if he might fall to pieces, as far as clothes were concerned, if the belt were suddenly removed.

The scene was a drinking-saloon in the new Colorado mining-town of Slippery Elm—a name chosen in accordance with a mere whim, because there was not an elm tree within a hundred miles of the place, as far as any one knew.

"THE WITNESS IS HERE," SHE CRIED, "AND THAT MAN DIDN'T DIE BY THE DRUMMER'S HAND!"

A dozen miners in blue shirts and cowhide boots, with pistols within easy reach somewhere about them, like the man referred to above, were seated around the bar-room listening to a story told by the bright, handsome, gentlemanly young fellow who had been addressed as a 'Squire.

He grasped the miner's great paw heartily and laughed as he said:

"Glad you like the yarn. We drummers generally keep a stock of them on hand to use when we get dull and tired on the road. Landlord, set 'em up for the boys again!"

"Hold on thar!" interposed the miner, solemnly. "Hold on thar! This hyar's my treat! I don't allow no man to head me off when my turn comes around, young feller. Dan Walker hain't that kind of coyote, an' don't yer forget it."

"All right, Dan; I ain't objecting!" said the young man, carelessly, as he twisted the ends of his light mustache and brushed a speck of dust from the lapel of his fashionably cut Prince Albert coat.

"What's yer stuff, then?" asked Dan.

"Oh, give me a little pop, I am not used to whisky," returned the young man.

"Pop?" muttered Dan Walker to himself, with a sniff of contempt. "That's er nice thing for a man to drink, but I s'pose these hyar Eastern fellers ain't used ter good lickin'!"

The young man, whose fresh face had evidently not been touched by the suns of more than twenty-five summers heard the remark, but did not make any reply.

Though from the East, he evidently knew that it was of no use to preach temperance sermons to these rough men, so he contented himself with swallowing his harmless beverage without finding fault with their drinking strong liquor.

He had been telling them stories and had got into their good graces—rather a difficult thing for a young man with a fashionable suit of clothes, white soft hands, and a languid drawl in his speech, for he had struck them at first as a dude who had no business in a mining-town.

In a district so far removed from the rest of the world, a sure passport to the affections of these delvers for wealth was the ability to amuse them.

The young man had shown them that he possessed this ability to the utmost, and though he had only been in Slippery Elm a few hours he was already a very popular character.

He had told them that he was traveling for a lace-house in Chicago, that business had called him to Denver, and that he was taking a trip through some of the mining-camps of Colorado for his own amusement.

"Well, boys, it's a nice moonlight night, and I think I'll take a little stroll around the town before I come back and go to bed," he said when the drinks had been disposed of.

"All right, 'Squire," assented Dan Walker; "but say, what is yer name, anyhow?"

"Oh, responded the young man, lightly, "my name is Joe Grattan, but I'm generally known among the boys as Peachblossom."

"Haw! haw!" laughed Dan, "what d'ye think of that thar, fellers? Peachblossom! Hey! Durned good name, too, by gum!"

Somehow this nickname seemed to strike Dan and his companions as very comical, and there was a general roar of laughter, as the young man stepped out of the foul, hot atmosphere of the saloon into the bright moonlight and the pure, life-giving air that came to him from the towering peaks of the distant Rockies.

He walked down the street, puffing quietly at his cigar, until he reached the stage-road that swung around abruptly to the right and ran along a gulch overshadowed by fir-clad rocks—a spur of the sierras springing upward to a height of a thousand feet.

Great boulders that had been loosened by rains or convulsions of nature, were scattered here and there along the road, but always leaving ample room for the passage of the coach.

"Pretty place," he mused, as he strutted carelessly along, his handsome, boyish face and curled blonde mustache lighted up fitfully by the glowing end of his cigar.

He stopped near a clump of furs and looked over the valley, which, spread before him was faintly discernible in the pale light of the moon.

"Throw up your hands!"

Short and sharp came the command.

Two men stood in the road, and Joe Grattan—or Peachblossom, as we prefer to call him—was looking smilingly into the muzzles of two 44-caliber six-shooters.

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," he said, with provoking calmness, and without removing his hands from his pants pockets. "Did I understand you to say—"

"Hands up! Put up your hands!" growled the nearest man, shaking his revolver.

"Oh, pshaw! You don't mean that, do you?" called out the drummer, still with his hands in his pockets.

"I'll give you just five seconds to get them hands of yours over your head, d'ye under-

stand?" threateningly shouted the man who had spoken before.

"Well, of course, if I must," returned Peachblossom, with a shrug of the shoulders.

He drew his hands from his pockets, and slowly raised them until his arms were extended perpendicularly.

His long, delicate white fingers, on one of which flashed a valuable diamond ring, drooped, as he held them on each side of his head.

"Good! You've got some sense, arter all, fer tenderfoot. Go through him, Bill!"

"Sh!" said the other, whose big red whiskers only allowed a red nose and a pair of twinkling blue eyes to be seen. "What's that?"

The two footpads, carefully keeping Peachblossom covered with their weapons, listened intently.

"Some o' them thar galoots from Slippery a-comin', sure as shooting," continued Bill.

"We'll hev ter git this hyar job over almighty quick if we're a-goin' to do it at all. Watch him close, Tom, an' I'll turn him inside out in a brace o' shakes."

Bill, the red-whiskered man, lowered his revolver as he prepared to take Peachblossom's portable property from his person, while his companion kept the muzzle of his pistol pointed at the head of the careless, smiling young man.

"Hurry up, Bill! We dunno who's a-comin' up the slope, thar, an' we don't want to wait an' see, as I know of."

Peachblossom's white hands drooped more and more.

Probably his arms were getting tired.

Bill looked him over, and, apparently satisfied that his pal had the drop on the young fellow, put his own pistol in his belt.

He unbuttoned the fashionably-cut Prince Albert coat worn by the young drummer, and his eyes glistened as he drew forth a handsome solid gold watch from the vest-pocket.

"Guess I may as well hev the chain, too," with a grin, "if you hev no 'bjection."

"Not the slightest, sir. You are managing this transaction, not I. All you have to do is to help yourself, and I'll deliver the goods. If you don't see what you want, ask for it."

"Say, kid," suddenly observed Bill, as he stepped back a pace and looked with something like admiration at Peachblossom's handsome face and dancing dark eyes. "You've got more pluck 'n I ever seen in a fresh chap from ther East afore; durned ef you ain't."

"So I've been told," returned Peachblossom, nonchalantly.

"Haw! haw!" laughed Bill.

Bang!

Bill's companion lay dead in his tracks with a bullet in his brain, and Bill himself cowered down before the handsomely-mounted "Colt's sixes," firmly grasped in the white hands of the smiling young drummer.

The white hands that had been gently drooping had been gradually getting nearer to the back of their owner's neck.

Just as Bill had burst into his fit of laughter the hands had suddenly swooped down to the back of the coat-collar, and seized the butts of two revolvers conveniently placed in scabbards that allowed their barrels to lie snugly between the young drummer's shoulders.

The next minute the two six-shooters were pointed at the footpads, and the weapon in the left hand discharged.

"Put your hands a little higher, Bill," suggested Peachblossom. "I can't afford to let you get the drop on me any more, don't you see?"

Bill, who had involuntarily thrown up his hands when the young drummer so unexpectedly produced his pistols, did as he was told, and raised his brown, horny hands as high as he could reach.

"That's right, Billy boy," said Peachblossom, cheerfully. "You'll excuse me if I remove your pistols from your belt, will you not?"

"Don't care what you do, if you'll let me get away from hyar before them thar fellers come. I kin hear 'bout a dozen of 'em travelin' up ther gulch," said Bill, nervously.

Peachblossom did not answer, but dexterously twitched Bill's pistols from his belt and threw them away a few yards.

"Now your knife, Billy. Where is it?"

Bill frowned and hesitated.

"Where is your knife?"

The voice that repeated this question was so stern and so unlike the dulcet tones of the handsome young drummer that Bill started and opened his twinkling blue eyes wider than he had done for a long time.

"It's—it's inside my shirt."

Peachblossom thrust his hand inside the other's blue flannel shirt and drew forth a wicked-looking bowie.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"Dirk," answered Bill, shortly.

"Where?"

"Belt, behind."

"Exactly," observed Peachblossom, as he pulled a dirk-knife from the back of Bill's belt, underneath his coat.

"That all, William?"

"Yes."

"Well heeled, weren't you?"

During the foregoing conversation the sound of footsteps had become very distinct, and now there suddenly burst into view the crowd of miners which the young man had lately left in the saloon, with Dan Walker at their head.

Bill made a movement to run, but Peachblossom's revolver was pointed at his head, as he sternly commanded:

"Stop! Stir another step, and I'll stretch you dead by the side of your pal."

"By gum, boys, thar's been fun hyar. Look at thet young one, with his gun in his hand, an' Red Bill with hands up!" shouted Dan Walker, as, with the practiced eye of a man used to such scenes, he comprehended the meaning of Bill's position and Peachblossom's pistols so aggressively displayed.

"Yes, Friend Dan, thou'rt right. Verily, the young man hath the Philistine by the throat, and—and—"

"Oh, shut up!" interrupted Dan, impatiently, and the other speaker, a tall, cadaverous individual, in the regulation blue shirt, overalls and cowhide boots of a miner, but on his head a very tall, straight, shining plug hat, subsided obediently.

Hiram Placid, generally called "Quaker Hi," was used to being snubbed, and Dan's brusque command did not hurt his feelings.

"What yer been doin', young feller?" continued Dan to Peachblossom, looking down at the body of the dead footpad.

"Killing snakes," answered Peachblossom, carelessly.

"Haw! Haw! Durned ef you ain't killed one of 'em, anyhow. Red Bill been tryin' to hold you up, eh? Well, we'll take him off'n yer hands. Thet's what we come fer. We want him for a little job as we suspect he done the other night, on Kid Hawkins."

"What was it?" asked Peachblossom.

"Grabbed a four-ounce bag o' dust ez Kid had buried in his cabin, thet's all."

"It's a lie," yelled Red Bill. "It's—"

"William, tell them where you put that dust," interrupted Peachblossom, quietly.

Red Bill looked uncertain for a second, but there was something in the dark eyes of the careless young drummer that made Bill think well to answer, and he growled sulkily:

"Lift up that big stone lyin' behind the second cedar right thar."

Dan stepped toward the tree indicated, moved the stone, and held up the bag of dust.

"Now, got anythin' more ag'in' me?" queried Red Bill, sullenly.

"Wal, I dunno. What d'ye say, boys? Don't yer think ez Slippery Elm would be better ef Red Bill took a dance in the atmosphere?"

"Verily, friend Dan, there is reason in thy remarks," said Quaker Hi. "I feel the spirit move me to—"

"Shut up!" put in Dan. Then he continued:

"Boys, bring him along. We'll take him down hyar to Kid Hawkins's cabin, an' hang him to ther rafters. Thet's ther idee."

"That's what, Dan. That's what we'll do," chorused his companions.

Three of them stepped forward to seize the trembling wretch, when Peachblossom swung around in front of him, and presenting both his pistols at the would-be lynchers, exclaimed:

"Hold! This man is mine, and I'll defend my property with my life!"

CHAPTER II.

A SORT OF EARTHQUAKE.

WHILE the handsome young drummer was relating his anecdotes in the saloon at Slippery Elm he had an interested listener, of whose existence he was utterly unaware.

In an adjoining room, with one eye to a knot-hole in the rough pine-board partition, was a young girl.

That she was enjoying the entertainment intensely could be seen by the way she occasionally hugged herself in her ragged old calico dress, and kicked and shuffled her feet in their untidy shoes, from which half the buttons had long since vanished.

A pretty, red-cheeked, mountain girl, of not more than eighteen, with a wealth of tangly brown hair falling loosely about her face and shoulders.

"My! Ain't he sweet?" she said to herself, as the young fellow set all the men laughing at some comical remark. "I should like to be in there, so I could hear him better."

She knelt down at her knot-hole until her eye was sore and watery with the breeze that came through, but she did not care, as long as she could hear the stories.

At last Peachblossom left the saloon, as we already know, and it was only a few minutes afterward when Dan Walker, in accordance with a previously-arranged plan, led the rest of the company out of the place to follow Red Bill and his ill-fated companion, Tom Riper.

"They are gone," ejaculated the girl, as she arose from her knees with a bounce, banged open a door in the partition, and skipped into the bar-room.

"Whar yer goin', gol-durn yer?" growled a voice from behind the bar.

"Nowhere, dad. Just want to see where Dan and the boys are walking to in the middle of the

night," answered the girl, carelessly, as she opened the front door and looked after the miners, straggling down the street in the moonlight.

"See hyar, now, Kitten; I don't want you to bother yer head with business ez don't consarn yer. Come in hyar!" was the command of the gruff voice of the man behind the bar.

"All right, dad; but you needn't be so cross. I wasn't doing any harm."

"Duuno 'bout that thar either. Come hyar. I want to talk to yer."

The owner of the gruff voice leaned on the bar and showed himself to be a short, thick-set man, with a bald head, a lowering countenance, and—one eye. The other had been gouged out in a bar-room fight ten years before.

Such was Nat Grute, keeper of the Slippery Elm Hotel and the father of "Kitten"—or Kate, as she believed herself to have been named.

"Now, see hyar, Kitten. I've got somethin' serious to say to yer."

"Drive ahead, dad; I'm listening."

Kitten seated herself on the edge of a table, among the empty tumblers, and let her feet swing carelessly backward and forward.

"Is that thar door shet?" asked Nat.

"Guess so."

"Go and see."

Kitten reluctantly jumped down from the table, shuffled across the floor, banged against the door, and reported that it was tightly closed.

"Lock it!" commanded Nat, briefly.

"What for?"

The answer was a heavy bottle thrown at her with all the force of Nat Grute's arm, and the missile smashed to fragments against the door-post, just above her head.

Kitten shrugged her shoulders and shut the big bolt of the door.

"You needn't be so cranky, dad. The door's bolted."

"Bet I'll make yer do ez I tells yer, or else break yer durned neck!" cried Nat, savagely.

He poured out a glass of fiery whisky and threw it down his throat, while the girl resumed her seat on the table and waited for him to go on with his communication.

Nat Grute did not speak for several moments. He leaned his chin in his two hands, both elbows resting on the bar, and looked intently at Kitten.

She did not seem to be at all embarrassed by his steady gaze, but sat swinging her feet and softly humming to herself, as if prepared to await his pleasure until daybreak, if necessary.

At last he spoke, in a much milder tone than he had hitherto used, as if he were desirous of mollifying the young girl.

"Kitten?"

"Well."

"You know that thar drummer feller what was in hyar to-night?"

Kitten was interested directly, and her eyes sparkled, as she said:

"Yes. What about him?"

"Kitten, I know that thar feller—have knowed him fer a long time. An' I know that he ain't jist ther man what he lets on to be."

"Why, dad, you told him to-night that you had never seen him before, and he said that every one here was strangers to him. Where did you know him?"

"Never mind," returned Grute. "I do know him, and he's a—thief!"

"Dad!"

Kitten had sprung from the table and was standing close to her father, looking into his single eye with an expression of the utmost indignation.

"Yes, you kin say 'Dad,' all yer want to. But I know that thar man. He comes hyar a-pretendin' ez he's er drummer from Chicago. I've seen him in Chicago, three years ago, but he warn't no drummer then, an' I don't believe he is now. I'm goin' to keep my eye on him."

Nat Grute, who had been working himself up into a rage, until his voice had risen almost to a shriek, took another drink of the fiery whisky and gasped.

"Well, dad, go on with your story," said Kitten, resuming her seat on the table, and swinging her feet as before.

"That thar man," continued Nat, "robbed me of a pile of money in Chicago, an' I'm goin' to hev some of it back afore he gets out o' Slippery Elm! That's all!"

With unsteady hand he poured out another glass of whisky, and scowled at Kitten with his one red-rimmed eye.

"That's the yarn, is it?" asked Kitten, coldly, as her feet swung faster than ever.

"That's (hic) ther yarn," acquiesced Grute, poisoning the glass in the air on its way to his mouth.

Ere it could touch his lips Kitten had snatched it from his hand, dashed the liquor in his face, and throwing the glass to the floor, had banged open the door in the partition, and locked herself in the other room—her own private apartment, where she slept, and which even her brutal father always held sacred.

She threw herself on her bed, and burst into a storm of passionate sobs.

"Just like him! Wants to do up that young man, as I know he's done others. Pretending that he's been robbed by a gentleman that any one can see is a gentleman. Just an excuse, so that he can pretend he has some reason to go through him. I know you, dad. You can't fool me, if I am only a girl!"

Thus soliloquizing, Kitten buried her tangly head on the pillow, and before she realized that she was even getting drowsy, had fallen fast asleep.

"Wal, durn that gal's picter!" Nat Grute was saying to himself, as he wiped the whisky from his face and bald head with a dirty towel.

"Ef she ain't the cheekiest young one I ever seen! Wasted three fingers of good lickin', too. Wal, I'll make up fer that by taking another drink, anyhow."

He suited the action to the word by putting the whisky-bottle to his mouth and taking a long pull with an air of exceeding relish.

"Ah, that hyar's splendid stuff (hic). Puts new life into er man. Pudge!"

As he uttered the last word, he kicked viciously at what seemed to be a big dog lying under the bar.

If it was a big dog, it did not appear to be affected by the kick, for it snored on with a contented air, as if it had so much sleep to get through, and was determined to finish the job in spite of interruptions.

"Wall, I'll be durned!" growled Nat savagely. "Pudge! Wake up, I tell yer!"

He gave a harder kick, and this time the dog, or whatever it was, moved uneasily, as if it realized that there was somebody kicking.

"Pudge!" called Nat for the third time.

"All right! What d'ye want?" answered the sleeping something, which evidently was *not* a dog.

"Git up. I've got somethin' for yer to do."

The mysterious sleeper slowly crawled out of his bed under the bar, and stood up rubbing its eyes.

A boy of perhaps fifteen, and enough like Nat Grute to be identified as his son at the first glance.

With the exception of the one eye and the bald head, he was an almost exact reproduction of his father in miniature.

"Tired, Pudge?"

"Kinder."

"Wal, I want yer to stay up for an hour or two, 'cause I got a job fer yer, Pudge," with a sly leer in the one serviceable eye.

Pudge returned the leer with an expression so like his father's, that it was positively startling.

"Wal, what's on the board, dad? 'Tain't a very nice time to wake er feller up onless thar's somethin' ez is mighty pertick'ler ter be done!" grumbled Pudge.

"Thar is somethin' pertick'ler ter be done, or I shouldn't er waked yer up. Yer might er knowed *that*."

Father and son were still looking at each other fixedly with that sly leer.

Pudge had walked around to the outside of the bar, and was leaning on it in the same attitude that his father had assumed.

Nat Grute bent forward until his mouth was close to the ear of his hopeful son, and whispered a few words.

Pudge slowly drew back and looked knowingly at his father as he said softly:

"To-night?"

Grute nodded.

"When will he be back?" asked Pudge.

"Most any minute. We had better fix things right away," returned Nat.

The Slippery Elm Hotel was a straggling frame structure, with only two floors. Ground was still cheap in Slippery Elm, and there was no inducement to builders to carry their edifices very high when they could procure ground on which to build for little or nothing.

Besides the bar-room, which extended the whole width of the house, there were three rooms behind. One was the bedroom of Kitten, another a sort of kitchen, adjoining which was the principal guest-chamber—at present assigned to the use of Joe Grattan, or "Peachblossom," the Chicago drummer.

"Door locked, dad?" asked Pudge, looking toward the entrance to the drummer's room.

"You bet! That thar feller's too flip to leave his things so that folks can git at them," returned Nat, with a grin. "Howsomever, we has ter git in thar, so hyar's er key ez I guess 'll open it."

He handed a clumsy key to Pudge, and in a minute the door was open and the boy looking into the apartment that had been engaged by Peachblossom.

Nat Grute, looking nervously around to see that they were quite alone, stepped to the door of Kitten's room and listened.

"Ther gal's asleep," he muttered, "an' a good thing too, gol-durn her! She's gittin' altogether too high-toned fer her company. She won't never do anythin' I want her ter, an' I'm kinder 'fraid she *knows* too much. Wal, I kin settle her, any time I want ter, anyhow, an' I s'pect I'll hev ter do it afore long. She—"

"What are yer grumblin' 'bout, dad?" interrupted Pudge, impatiently. "Thet galoot 'll be back hyar 'fore we're ready, sure as shootin'!"

Bring thet candle an' let's see what we has to do."

Grute took a candle, stuck in a bottle, from behind the bar, and lighting it, followed his son into Peachblossom's room.

It contained only a bed and bedstead, a table and two chairs, with a strip of rag carpet running along the floor from wall to wall at the foot of the bed.

On the table were two valises of black leather, such as drummers use for sample-cases.

Nat and Pudge noted these two valises on the table, and looked significantly at each other.

"Dad, look around ag'in, an' see thet thar ain't nobody a-watchin'," whispered Pudge.

"It's all right," assured Nat. "Thar can't be nobody. Lift up ther carpet."

Pudge produced a small hatchet that he had indeed held in his hand since he came from the bar-room, and proceeded to pull out the nails that held the carpet to the floor.

A stranger would have noticed that the nails were rather large for carpet-tacks, being an inch and a half in length, and that they were placed much closer together than usual.

The carpet had been nailed down so firmly, that there was but little danger of its being accidentally misplaced.

Pudge worked industriously and soon had the nails out of one end of the carpet.

"Sure thar's no one about, dad?" he asked as he looked up, with a very red face, superinduced by his exertions.

"Cert. Who kin thar be? Pull it up."

Pudge threw back the portion of the carpet that he had loosened, and showed the rough flooring underneath.

The head of a large nail shone brightly in the corner of the room.

Pudge struck the nail a sharp blow with the hatchet.

"Keerful, Pudge! Why didn't yer put somethin' over that nail—a piece er rag or somethin', so ez it wouldn't make so much noise?" demanded Nat, looking apprehensively around.

Pudge took the hint, and placed a corner of the carpet over the nail-head ere he struck again.

Then he stamped on the floor.

The result was rather startling. A square hole, some four feet either way, opened, by a trap in the floor sinking and hanging by hinges concealed by the fold of the carpet.

A cold, damp puff of air came up from the hole, and made the boy shudder involuntarily.

"Now hurry, Pudge!" enjoined Nat, "fer it's mighty nigh time fer thet feller ter be back. He hes only went out fer er stroll down ther street."

Pudge did not answer. He was busily arranging the trap so that the hole would be concealed. He lifted the wooden flap, or door, so that it could not easily be discerned, even with the carpet up. But though it appeared to be as solid as before, it was not.

A spring, invented and applied by Nat and his precocious son, held the trap in position, but the weight of a man upon it would break it down and drop him into the unknown depths below.

Pudge's deft fingers soon arranged the trap and replaced the carpet, so that no signs of his work could be discerned.

"I'm goin' ter take ther liberty of lookin' inter this hyar valise, Pudge," announced Nat, as he tried the fastenings of one of the cases on the table.

"What fer, dad? We'll git ther hull business after er while. Let's get out o' hyar now, an' wait for him to take er drop," said Pudge, with a sly grin.

"No; I want ter see what he's got in hyar—an' by the great horn spoon, it's onlocked, too!"

Nat gave a tug at the valise to pull it open.

It suddenly gave way, and then—there was a tremendous report, that shook the old frame-house to its foundations, while Nat Grute and Pudge were hurled across the room in a bruised, smoke-blackened heap.

At the same moment a mockingly polite voice—that of Peachblossom, the handsome young drummer—said:

"There seems to have been an earthquake, or something, here! If I can be of any assistance, gentlemen, I am entirely at your service!"

CHAPTER III.

WHO HAS THE WILL?

IF Dan Walker and his companions were surprised at Peachblossom posing as the champion of the man who had attempted to rob and threatened to murder him, they were not more so than was Red Bill.

He had made up his mind that his hour had come, and was trying, though unsuccessfully, to make up his mind to die with his boots on as bravely as many another man he had seen swung off by indignant Regulators.

And now, here was this dudish young tender-foot standing between him and death, as bravely as if he had lived in the shadow of the Rockies all his life!

"Wal, say, 'Squire, this hyar thing ain't 'zackly reg'lar, yer know," remonstrated Dan Walker. "Red Bill has played it on ther boys

in this hyar section more'n once, an' now he's tried to hold you up. Fer ther good o' Slippery Elm, an' ther community in general, I say he ought ter be swung. Ain't that so, boys?" turning to the others.

"Verily, Friend Daniel, thou smitest the nail on the head," said Quaker Hi, as he took off his high, shiny plug hat, and brushed it carefully with his sleeve.

"Let's bang him," was the growl that came from the other miners.

"Yea, verily, as high as Haman."

"Up with him, boys!" cried Dan.

"Stand back!" thundered Peachblossom, as he leveled his revolvers full at the heads of the two foremost.

"Wal, now, 'Squire, what is it yer want?" asked Dan, in an argumentative way. "You can't do nothin' with Red Bill, kin yer! You don't want to hev him stuffed an' use him fer a parlor ornament, do yer?"

"Verily, Friend Dan, thy humor is strongly marked, and causes me to laugh consumedly," put in Quaker Hi, as he extended his parchment features into a grin that seemed to crack the flesh.

"Shut up!" shortly.

"I will open not my lips again," returned Hiram, meekly. "I—"

"Shut up!" roared Dan Walker, at the top of his voice, as he knocked Quaker Hi's tall hat from his head, sending it spinning down the gulch.

The Quaker was so upset by this incident that he did not trouble himself any further about Red Bill, occupying himself for the next ten minutes in tenderly brushing and inspecting the tall hat, which, however, was too hard to be damaged by such a trifle as a blow or a kick.

"See here, Dan Walker," cried Peachblossom, "do you think I'm a square man?"

"Wal, 'Squire, ter be honest with yer, I do! You've only been hyar in Slippery Elm a little while, but it ain't takin' the boys hyar a month ter size a man up, from his heels ter his top-knot, an' we've concluded ez you're squar'. So put her thar."

Dan extended that great fist of his, and Peachblossom unhesitatingly dropped the revolver in his right hand to the ground to enable him to return the proffered grasp.

This impulsive act pleased the rough miners as perhaps nothing else could, and when Dan released the young man's hand it had to be given to each of the crowd in turn, with the exception of Hiram Placid, who was too busy polishing his high plug hat to pay attention to anything else.

"Say, fellers," said Dan, turning to the others. "What d'ye say to letting him take his man? I dunno ez we keer anything 'bout Red Bill, so long ez we hev ther dust ez he took from Kid Hawkins."

"That's so," acquiesced one man; and then there was a chorus of "That's so" from the rest.

"Wal, then let's git back to town and bunk. It's time we took er little sleep of we're goin' to do any work to-day. It's durned near break-fast-time, anyhow, an' ther moon'll be going down in another half-hour. As fer Red Bill, why, let Peachblossom hev him, and I wish him joy of his bargain."

"Verily, I am a-weary and would fain retire. I will seek my closet, and give myself up to silent meditation until sunrise. Farewell, brethren, farewell!"

With these words, uttered in sepulchral tones that called forth a hearty laugh from Dan, Quaker Hi disappeared down the gulch.

"Ther durndest fool I ever saw, 'cept at poker, an' then you've got ter watch him, fer he never plays a game without having his pocket full of aces," declared Dan. "Come on, boys. Good-night, Peachblossom. Take keer o' Red Bill, an' don't let him get foolin' around Kid Hawkins's cabin ag'in, if you want him ter con-tinner ter live!"

There was a general laugh at Walker's sally, and then the miners walked briskly down the gulch, leaving the careless young drummer—who now held his pistols, one in each hand—alone with Red Bill and the corpse of his companion.

Red Bill stood looking wonderingly at the handsome drummer.

The desperado was thoroughly cowed by the young, fashionably-dressed drummer, and he could not understand it.

"Bill?"

"Yes!"

There was something in the drummer's tone, even when he uttered a simple monosyllable, that commanded respect from Red Bill.

"Listen to me," went on Peachblossom.

"I'm er-listenin'."

"And speak the truth when I ask you questions."

"That's what I propose ter do."

"You'd better."

Peachblossom made this last observation in a significant way that had a due effect on Red Bill.

"Have the Slippery Elm people anything else against you besides that Kid Hawkins job?"

Red Bill tossed his head indignantly.

"Now, don't put on airs of injured innocence with me," continued Peachblossom, coolly, "be cause it won't work. Just answer my question."

"Wal, no. I took the dust from Kid Hawkins's ranch, 'cause I meant to skip this hyar section, an' I had to hev money to go with; but that's the only crooked action ez I ever did in my life. 'Cept I tried to do you up; an' you know how that thar thing come out."

"You never stole anything in your life except that bag of gold-dust from Hawkins, eh?" asked the drummer quietly.

"Never."

"You lie!"

Peachblossom bent forward until his face was within a few inches of that of Red Bill as he uttered these two words fiercely.

Red Bill started, and his hand flew to his belt mechanically, seeking a weapon, before he remembered that he was unarmed.

Peachblossom smiled disdainfully as he noticed the movement, and stepping back to where he had thrown Red Bill's pistols, picked up one and placed it in the desperado's hand.

"Is your gun all right, Bill? Look at it and see," ordered the drummer, still the quiet smile playing around his neat blonde mustache.

Red Bill, in a mystified way, turned over his familiar weapon in his hand, and saw that it was in perfect condition, loaded in every chamber, and ready for instant action.

"Yes, ther gun's all right. It never went back on me since I first had it. It's a daisy, I tell yer," declared Bill, delighted to once more hold his cherished six-shooter in his grasp.

"You could shoot now before a man had time to wink eh?" asked Peachblossom.

"Wal, I should say! Before he had time to think 'bout winkin'."

"Good! Well, Red Bill, I repeat what I said to you a minute ago: *You lie!*"

Like a flash Red Bill's revolver was pointed at the head of Peachblossom. But—he did not fire.

"You lie!" hissed Peachblossom, again, looking straight into the eyes of Red Bill in the moonlight. "Why don't you shoot?"

Red Bill stood, with his pistol still aiming at the head of the tantalizing young man whom he could have sent to eternity by a mere pressure of his finger, but his finger did not move. It seemed to be absolutely paralyzed.

"When I say you lie, Red Bill, I know what I am talking about," went on Peachblossom.

"Do you remember meeting a man on a quiet street on the West Side in Chicago about three years ago?"

Red Bill gradually dropped the hand that held the pistol, while his lips parted in surprise and dismay.

"Yes, I see you remember it. You needn't say anything, Bill. You had a sandbag, and you slugged him with it. You got a watch and fifty-four dollars and thirty-three cents from his pockets. You got away, but the police are watching for you, Bill."

"Who says I—?" began Red Bill, blustering.

"Keep cool, Bill, I say it. *I know it.*"

"Wal, who are yer? You ain't no drummer; I'm sure of that. You knows a durned sight too much 'bout—'bout—things in Chicago, ez—ez—drummers don't often find out. What's yer real name?" asked Bill nervously, as he looked around him in the hunted way peculiar to criminals when they find themselves cornered.

"I have told the people of Slippery Elm my real name. It is Joe Grattan. The boys on the road have nicknamed me Peachblossom, because they say I am fresh-looking—"

"You are a fresh duck, that er fact," put in Red Bill, *sotto voce*.

"I am traveling for the lace house of Valens & Schwab, Chicago, but I also have another line of business, totally distinct from laces, which, with Valens & Schwab's sanction, I devote as much time to as I require. Look!"

Peachblossom threw open his Prince Albert coat and showed something glistening on his vest almost under his left arm.

It was a small star of silver, with something engraved upon it that could not be distinguished in the now waning moonlight.

"The secret police service of Chicago!" gasped Red Bill.

"Exactly," assured Peachblossom, with a smile that was absolutely infantile in its innocence.

Red Bill was too overcome even to speak.

"Now, look here, Bill," continued Peachblossom, in a rapid, business-like tone, unlike any that he had used before. "I am in this part of the country looking for a certain will. I know, or at least I suspect so strongly that I may almost call it knowledge, that a certain man in Slippery Elm has the paper. I am going to have it before I leave. I need some one to help me. You will be the man."

"I?" said Bill, dreamily.

"Yes, you. You may think it strange that I should trust you. But—I know my business."

"I'll bet yer do," muttered Bill. "But they're a tough lot o' citizens in Slippery Elm, an' if they see yer a-foolin' 'round an' don't jest know

what you are after, they might shoot yer afore you could explain."

"I'll take my chances on that. Besides, perhaps I can shoot quickly myself."

"Wal, you want to shoot durned quick and be able to hit what yer a-shootin' at, too, when yer get in a muss 'roun' hyar, I'm a-tellin' yer, now."

"See that black stump down there sticking up behind that boulder near that clump of cedars?" asked Peachblossom, suddenly.

"Yes; but, by gracious, I don't remember seein' it afore," said Bill.

"Watch!"

Peachblossom suddenly raised his left hand, still holding a revolver, and fired three shots in quick succession at the stump.

"Durned ef that ain't ther best shootin' I ever seen," exclaimed Red Bill, admiringly. "Why you've blown the stump cl'ar out o' sight."

"I just wanted to show you that I can shoot, if I am from Chicago," remarked Peachblossom, smilingly. "Now, I am goin' to use you right if you behave yourself. If you don't, I shall know what to do. Pick up your other gun and here are your knives. I'll see about getting that body buried in the morning," pointing at the remains of the dead footpad, Tom Riper.

Red Bill submissively took his weapons and bestowed them about his person in their usual places, watching Peachblossom closely all the time, as if anxious to anticipate any wish he might express.

In some way the handsome, careless young fellow in the fashionable clothes and with the distinguished air, had gained a complete ascendancy over the rough outlaw. There was no danger to be apprehended from Red Bill in the future, and Peachblossom knew that in the footpad and sneak-thief he had a follower who would give his life rather than betray him.

"I am going back to the hotel, Bill, to get a few hours' sleep. You go somewhere and do the same. Come to the hotel at noon and ask for me, do you hear?"

"Wal, I dunno. Will it be safe for me to come? I don't keer 'bout showin' myself much aroun' that thar town. The boys might—"

"The boys will not touch you. Red Bill is under my protection, and they know it. You will be safe. Mind you're on time. There is work to do, an' it's got to be done quickly."

Without another word, Peachblossom turned and strode lightly down the gulch toward the Slippery Elm Hotel.

Red Bill watched him out of sight, and then walked slowly away in the other direction, after throwing a big red handkerchief over the white face of his dead companion, which lay upturned in the last faint rays of the now rapidly-disappearing moon.

"Poor Tom, He's rubbed out. Wal, it's a durned good job it wasn't me," he muttered, as he went on toward some secret hiding-place that he intended to use as a sleeping apartment until he should be called upon to keep his appointment with his new master.

"Verily, Hiram Placid, thou art in luck. Thou shalt yet possess many of the good things of this earth. The Philistines are seeking to deprive thee of thy just possessions, but thou art armed with a foreknowledge of their intentions, and thou shalt yet confound their plans."

The speaker was Quaker Hi, who had been secreted in the clump of cedars and had heard nearly all the conversation between Peachblossom and Red Bill, until he had moved down the gulch and hidden behind the big boulder, just in time to offer the tall shiny plug hat as a mark for Peachblossom's revolver, and which the young drummer had mistaken for a stump.

"Verily, it was a fortunate thing that my head was not near the top of my hat, or I should have suffered grievous pain," added Hiram, ruefully, as he sat upon the top of the big boulder and looked at three holes where Peachblossom's bullets had perforated the tall hat.

He put the hat carefully on his head, and as he shambled toward the town, muttered.

"So, he's looking for old Wallace's will, is he? Well, he'll get it when Hiram Placid says so, and not before."

Then, remembering his Quaker dialect, which he had dropped for an instant in his earnestness, he added:

"And, verily, the ways of the wicked detective are an abomination, and they shall be confounded—if the court knows herself."

CHAPTER IV.

KITTEN IN PERIL.

THE sun was high in the heavens the next day, and the cloudless Colorado sky spread in a glorious canopy of hazy blue over mountain, plain, canyon and forest.

On a pass running along the face of a mighty hill, above which on the one side arose the straight wall of the cliff, while on the other was an abrupt descent of thousands of feet to the rolling foothills stretching away to the valley, a young girl stood looking down in silent enjoyment of the scene.

The fluttering rags of the faded calico dress were those of Kitten, whose costume was the same as that of the night before, save that she

wore a large straw hat, with blue ribbons, on her tangly hair.

"Gosh! It's good to get out here and swallow the fresh air after being in that stuffy old shanty all night," she was saying. "Believe I could climb up there to that other ledge above if I could get a good hold on that pine."

She was looking at a gigantic tree that, growing in a fertile spot a few feet over her head, had been partially blown down, and was hanging almost horizontally from the face of the hill.

Active as a cat, Kitten jumped and caught one of the limbs of the tree, and with a quick movement drew herself up until she sat upon the trunk.

"Mighty nice seat and a good view, but it would be good-night all, for me, if anything was to give way, for it would send me over the precipice, as sure as my name is Kitten—which it ain't, though," she added, "for it's Kate. But that would not make any difference to me if I was dropped head-first over the bluff."

She sat at that dizzy height swinging her feet, much as she had swung them from the table in the saloon the night before.

Her thoughts wandered at will, free and untrammelled as her movements.

"I'm going to stop dad hunting that feller from the East," she said to herself. "He's too nice to be laid out by the toughs of Slippery Elm. It don't seem right for a girl to talk about her father as a tough, I guess, but that's all he is. If he wasn't I shouldn't say so; so it's his own fault, and not mine, after all."

Her conscience comforted by this reflection, Kitten swung her feet contentedly, and pursued her reflections:

"There's one thing, Peachblossom—(Peachblossom! What a cute name!)—is so handy with his gun that he needn't be very much scared by the boys. All the same I'm going to watch that he gets a square deal, and if Pudge tries any of his monkey work I'll—"

Kitten did not finish the sentence, but she clinched her little brown fist with a vigor that boded no good to Pudge if he showed any evil intention toward the young drummer whom Kitten had taken under her special protection.

"I want to get up to that other ledge over my head. Then I can go down that narrow path and get home to dinner," thought Kitten. "Besides I want to speak to—to—Peachblossom (He, he! Ain't that a cute name!)—and tell him to watch things while he is in Slippery Elm."

She looked at the ledge she had referred to.

It was an overhanging slab of rock, just out of her reach as she sat on the tree-trunk.

"It's a nasty place. But, I believe I can get up there if I'm careful."

As lightly as a bird, she sprang to her feet on the precarious platform afforded by the tree-trunk.

One false step and she would be hurled into the ravine, three thousand feet below.

She cautiously walked along the slippery tree until she stood at the very end, where she stopped and looked calmly down.

Had she not been a mountain-bred girl this alone would have insured her death. An unaccustomed person would have been seized with dizziness and fallen over beyond all question.

She reached up with both hands and seized the edge of the ledge.

"Guess it's strong enough to bear my weight. Hope so, anyhow. Can't afford to have it give way now," she said, as she hung upon it, still with her feet just touching the tree-trunk, however, as a measure of precaution.

"Now, for a spring!"

She summoned all her strength and agility, and pulled herself up.

She had secured a firm hold on the ledge and was digging her fingers into the loose earth and sand, but all her strength was insufficient to raise her to the ledge so that she could crawl upon it.

"Land sakes! What am I going to do? I can't hang here between earth and emptiness all day. And, by Jerusha, I can't pull myself up, nor let myself down. Kitten, you're in a bad fix, my dear," she gasped, as she tried to think what she should do.

Her situation was indeed enough to appall any one of even the stoutest nerves.

She had drawn herself up with a sudden leap that had taken her feet perhaps two feet from the tree-trunk, but without giving her a strong enough hold on the ledge to enable her to crawl any higher.

If she let herself down, the chances were a hundred to one against her dropping upon the tree. If she missed it, the result would be a sure and terrible death.

On the other hand, she was utterly powerless to reach the safety that would be afforded by the overhanging ledge.

Kitten was not easily frightened, but when she had tried half-a-dozen times to reach the ledge and found that her strength had nearly failed her, and that sheer exhaustion would soon compel her to take the frightful chance of dropping to the tree-trunk, a cold spasm, such as she had never felt before in all her young life, passed over her.

She made another convulsive struggle to drag herself to safety, but without avail.

She tried to look down, that she might judge the position of the tree, but in her cramped position this was impossible.

"Kind of hard to die this way, but it don't matter," she thought. "Father nor Pudge don't care anything about me, and poor mother's been dead so long that I forget what she looked like. There ain't no one as'll be sorry for poor Kitten."

The straw hat had fallen back, and was hanging from her neck by the ribbons, allowing her tangly hair to blow across her forehead in the playful mountain breeze.

It seemed to mock the bright young girl who was so soon to fall to her death under the glorious summer sky of beautiful Colorado.

Her head drooped and she shut her eyes to await the inevitable moment when she must allow her overstrained muscles to relax and meet her fate.

She tried to mutter the prayer that she had learned from her mother when a child, and that she had always religiously repeated every night before sleeping, since, but her parched throat prevented the utterance of a sound.

Poor Kitten was indeed in a sore strait.

The fluttering rags of her old calico dress, the straw hat hanging by its blue ribbons, and the tangled brown hair glinting in the sunlight, all seemed to rebel against the idea of the poor, light-hearted, careless young girl meeting the fate that awaited her.

Even the sun hid itself partly for an instant behind a passing cloud, as if to shut out the approaching tragedy from its face.

With a last attempt—weaker than any before—to draw herself up, Kitten gradually released her hold of the rock, and sunk back, slowly—to her death!

Her hands scraped along in the earth and sand, as with the clinging to life natural to all creatures, she was loth to let go her hold.

Suddenly her grasp gave way, when—

Two strong, sinewy hands seized her wrists with a nervous grasp, and the next instant she was lying, panting at full length, on the ledge.

For full five minutes she lay, with her face buried in her hands, trying to realize that she had been saved.

Then she staggered to her feet, and, leaning against the straight cliff that arose from the narrow ledge upon which she stood, looked into the face of her preserver.

"Verily, sister Kitten, 'twere well that thy servant chanced to be meditating here on the mountain, or thou mightst have been hurled from this high place to the valley, where thou wouldst undoubtedly have suffered grievous injury. Yea, verily!"

The tall form of Quaker Hi, with the high, shining plug hat surmounting it as usual, stood before her, and she knew that she was indebted to him for her life.

She would rather that it had been almost anyone else in Slippery Elm, for she did not like the wearer of the shining plug hat, and she most disliked him when he tried—as he often did—to be agreeable to herself. There was something snaky about him, she thought.

However, ingratitude was not one of Kitten's failings, so she frankly placed her hand in the cold, clammy paw of Hiram Placid, and said, simply:

"If it wasn't for you I should be dead now."

Hiram squeezed the brown, soft hand and put it to his lips.

Kitten drew it away quickly, with an involuntary movement of loathing; then with a nervous laugh, she tried to explain by saying:

"Your lip is rough. Guess you ought to shave. It tickled my hand!"

"Verily, thy hand is very sensitive, sister Kitten. Almost as sensitive as my—"

"What?" broke in Kitten, with a quizzical smile.

"Nay, nothing at all," returned Hiram, as the very sentimental and languishing expression he had allowed to gather on his cadaverous features gave way to an ugly frown that corrugated his whole forehead. He had intended to say "heart," but Kitten had laughed him out of it.

"Well, Hi, I don't know how to thank you for saving my life. Perhaps I may be able to do something for you, some time. Though I am sure I don't know how."

"I do," said Hiram, eagerly, as he leaned forward and looked straight into her eyes.

"Why, what can I do, Hiram?"

Quaker Hi leaned forward, and stooping until his face was close to the girl's, whispered in her ear.

She started back as if stung, and then, her eyes filling with indignant tears, such as no danger or pain could have brought to the surface, said hurriedly:

"Hiram Placid, what do you mean?"

"Just what I say. I mean that, of all the women I have ever seen, you are the only one for whom I would give my life, if necessary. I mean, Kitten, that, man of the world as I am, case-hardened against almost every feeling that

men construe into love; with experience in more walks in life than you can know; with more than twice the number of years that you have seen weighing on my shoulders and teaching me cynicism; with the full knowledge that you are only a young girl, inexperienced save in the ways of mining-camps and border towns, I love you, Kitten, and promise that if you will marry me, I will take you to an eastern city, and teach you what life is when surrounded by all the comforts, luxuries and refinements that wealth alone can purchase. That is what I mean, Kitten, and it is only the hope of obtaining you that brings me here, to this wild, out-of-the-world locality, and causes me to mix with men with whom I have hardly one thought, hope or desire in common. That's what I mean, Kitten."

Hiram had spoken with a tumultuous impetuosity as unlike his usual drawl as were the sentences that rolled so glibly from his tongue distinct from the stilted phrases that generally adorned his conversation.

He evidently forgot that he was a Quaker when he became excited.

Kitten looked at him in undisguised wonder. There was nothing of Hiram Placid about the man before her save his appearance, and even that seemed to change under the influence of strong excitement.

His accent, his manner, his mode of speech, all had changed.

She was more frightened of him now than she had ever been; though she had always tried instinctively to avoid him since the day he first appeared at Slippery Elm, a few weeks before, and staked out a claim on the mountain away from every one else.

He seemed to recollect himself suddenly, for it was with the familiar drawl of Quaker Hi that he added, after a pause:

"What is the reply of sister Kitten to my proposal? Fain would I that her people were my people, and her path my path. Yea, verily!"

These words, in the old tones, seemed to bring the girl to herself. Her face flushed, and there was no mistaking the dislike and determination of her voice, as she said:

"Hiram Placid, you have saved my life, and I should like to do something to show that I am grateful. But, if you ever say anything about love or—or—marriage, or any nonsense of that sort again, you will insult me, and I will never say another word to you as long as I live. Now I am going to dinner. Good-by!"

She turned to run down the narrow path, when Quaker Hi stepped before her, barring her passage, and in a fierce whisper, hissed:

"Stop!"

Kitten looked into his face with indignant surprise.

"What do you mean, Hi? Get out of my way."

"No. Listen! I have offered you my love and asked you to marry me. You refuse. Well," resuming his Quaker drawl, "verily, thou hast been delivered into my hands, an' I'll hold thee as a prisoner until thou dost consent to become my wife. I have a safe and secret hiding-place in the hollow of this great mountain, and there will I immure thee until thou dost learn obedience. Yea, verily!"

Like a young elk that is cornered, Kitten sprang at Hiram, and giving him a push to one side that nearly sent him over the precipice, dashed down the path toward the town that just showed the roofs of its shanties in the distance.

She had gained a dozen yards before Hiram recovered from the unexpected push she had given him. Then he started in pursuit.

His long legs covered the ground rapidly, but Kitten, agile as the elk to which we have already compared her, was more than a match in speed for the Quaker.

He was already beginning to breathe hard and show other signs of distress, with Kitten now twenty yards away.

"Curse her!" he muttered, "she must not get away now, or all my plans will be upset, especially with that meddlesome Peachblossom as he calls himself, loafing around here. He evidently knows all about that will. Ha! I've got her, after all."

Kitten had stumbled over a boulder that she had tried to clear at a bound. Her foot had struck it and thrown her forward to the ground, half-stunned.

Before she could regain her feet, Quaker Hi had grasped her by the arm, and holding the muzzle of a six-shooter to her face, hissed:

"Speak louder than a whisper and I'll shoot you down without mercy—er—er— Yea, verily!"

CHAPTER V.

WHY HIRAM WANTED TO MARRY KITTEN.

"LET go of my arm, Hiram Placid," cried Kitten as she tried to break away from his grasp.

"Keep quiet, d've hear, or I'll shoot as sure as there is a sun above us! Come along!"

There was no pretense of the Quaker drawl in the fierce tones of the desperate man who now dragged Kitten up the path. He did not attempt to disguise his brutality.

"What do you want me for?" asked Kitten, as she gave way to his determined pull at her arm and walked in an apparently docile manner by his side.

"Verily, thou art coming to thy senses, sister Kitten. I fain would hold improving discourse with thee and I feel the spirit move me to request thy presence in my humble abode while I thus speak with thee."

He rolled up his eyes with the sanctimonious expression that he commonly wore, and carefully arranged the tall shiny hat upon the top of his sleek, black hair.

Kitten did not say another word. She knew she was temporarily in this man's power, and she felt strong enough to protect herself, in case she was threatened with deadly peril.

One thing gave her particular satisfaction, and that was that Quaker Hi, the drawing, slow-spoken, awkward fellow, who had become the butt of the whole camp, had shown himself in his true colors.

Why he should seek to make a prisoner of her when she had refused his love, she did not know; but she had not the slightest doubt that he had some hidden purpose which had hitherto remained utterly unsuspected.

In a few minutes they stood on the spot where Hiram had dragged her over the edge of the precipice and saved her life.

Kitten looked inquiringly at Hiram.

He smiled tauntingly, and motioned for her to walk on a little further.

Kitten obeyed, and passed along up the path, with Hiram, pistol in hand, close behind her.

The path became narrower, until at last there was not more than two feet of space between the precipitous rock on the one side and the yawning chasm on the other.

Again she turned and looked at Hiram.

He waved his hand as a sign for her to walk on, and without a word of remonstrance she obeyed.

Kitten stopped when she reached a small cedar that, apparently growing from a crevice in the rocks, occupied the whole of the narrow path, and made it absolutely impossible to proceed any further.

"Stand still!" briefly commanded Hiram.

He stepped up close behind Kitten, and reaching over her shoulder, seized the nearest limb of the cedar.

He tugged at it cautiously, and, to the girl's surprise, the whole bush came away and lay on one side, revealing a hole in the rock about four feet square.

Hiram silently pointed to the hole with the hand that held the pistol.

"Do you mean to say, Quaker Hi, that I am to crawl in there?" asked Kitten, indignantly.

"Yea, verily."

"I won't do it!" and the girl planted herself firmly in the narrow path, as if she meant what she said.

Hiram slowly nodded his head, so that the shiny tall plug hat was perfectly dazzling in the sunshine, and said, significantly, as he extended a lank, lean finger toward the frightful depths that were almost lost in the haze of distance:

"Yea, but thou wilt, or it shall go grievously with thee!"

Kitten saw there was no vestige of pity in the cruel face which glowered at her beneath the tall hat, and shrugging her shoulders, stooped and crawled into the hole.

The place was quite dry, though pitch dark, save for the little light that came in at the aperture by which she had entered, and which was, of course, obscured by her own figure when she crawled in.

"Be not afraid, but pass in and all will be well with thee," said Hi, in wheedling tones. "Thou need not crawl now. The apartment is lofty when thou hast passed the portal."

Taking the hint, Kitten arose to her feet and saw that Hiram Placid was crawling in after her.

A sudden thought struck her like an inspiration, and she acted upon it instantly.

From a sheath in the waistband of her calico dress, where it was completely concealed, she drew a small dirk-knife, with an ivory handle, and sprung upon the kneeling Hiram.

But Quaker Hi was on the alert. Before Kitten could use the knife, as she fully intended to do, he had jumped to his feet and forced her back into the cave.

He did not see the knife, and Kitten dexterously slipped it into its sheath without his knowing that he had been very near death at the hands of the young girl whom he had contrived to get into his power.

"Thou should not bear thyself so flightily, gentle maiden. Such forwardness will not deliver thee out of my hands. Verily, thou art my captive, and thus will I keep thee."

"Don't be a fool, Hiram Placid. Talk United States," said Kitten, contemptuously. "You can if you want to. I've found that out."

Hiram, without replying to this pointed remark, seized a rope that hung against the wall and pulled at it vigorously.

The result was a sudden flood of sunlight that made Kitten involuntarily shade her eyes with her hand.

The rope connected with a stout wooden trap-door in the roof of the cave, which had been raised by Hiram's pull, letting in the full light of day.

Kitten looked curiously around the cave to see in what kind of prison she was to be imprisoned.

An exclamation of surprise and admiration burst from her lips ere she knew that she had spoken.

Hiram Placid smiled carelessly and said, still with his Quaker drawl:

"Thou seems astonished, sister Kitten. Didst thou suppose that thy servant had thus provided himself with worldly goods in the wilderness? I pray thee seat thyself on this couch, while I prepare for thee food and drink—yea, milk and honey will I set before thee."

"Don't like milk and honey. Give me hash. That will suit me better," returned Kitten, dropping upon a settee covered with a soft bear-skin.

The apartment upon which she gazed was indeed an excuse for her wondering exclamation.

It was a large room, about twelve feet wide. How long she could not see, as the light from the queer trap-door did not penetrate to the end, which was lost in gloom.

The rocky walls were just as they had been hewn by some convulsion of nature in long-forgotten years.

The opening by which she and Hiram had entered was closed. Her companion had shut it up by some contrivance that she did not understand, and she could not even distinguish the spot where the means of ingress had been. The walls all looked as solid as if they had never been disturbed since the cave was formed.

But what astonished Kitten most was the fact that the cave was comfortably, and even luxuriously, furnished.

As Quaker Hi walked into the gloom, and then, with a rattle and a bang, successively opened three more traps in the roof and let in more light, she saw that there were skins of many wild animals carpeting the rough floor and thrown over stools and boxes, making comfortable seats and giving pleasure to the eye.

A heap of skins in a distant corner was evidently used as a bed, while a solid-looking mahogany desk, or *escritoire*, with a curiously carved chair in front of it suggested that Quaker Hi was in the habit of passing a goodly portion of his time either reading or writing or both.

A pile of books on top of the *escritoire* indicated still further the literary taste of the owner of the cave.

In a large recess in the wall Kitten saw several bottles and household utensils as if Quaker Hi were not disposed to neglect the commissariat department in his domestic economy.

Kitten sat still on her settee, noting everything, but saying nothing while Hiram opened a huge trunk apparently used as a pantry and brought forth a large loaf of white bread, fresh butter, and canned meats, which he placed on a table before her.

"Wouldst thou drink of the water of Canaan?" he asked, as he took one of the bottles from the recess and put it on the table beside the loaf.

"Meaning forty-rod whisky, eh?" said Kitten. "Not any of it for me. If you have any real spring water—"

"I haven't, but verily I can soon make thee some coffee."

"Make it then," imperiously commanded Kitten.

Hiram, who appeared anxious to please the girl in everything but giving her liberty, produced a spirit lamp, and with water that he took from a pail under the table, soon had a tin receptacle full of fragrant steaming coffee.

"There, sister Kitten. I pray thee satisfy thyself. Thou must be both a-hungered and a-thirst. That coffee, I trust will be to thy taste. The water in its natural state is unpalatable, but when cooked with coffee, is not unbecoming."

Kitten, a careless, light-hearted girl, needed no second invitation, but at once fell to on what was a better meal than she would have enjoyed at her father's shanty—the Slippery Elm Hotel.

She was not very much frightened over Quaker Hi's extraordinary behavior, and she had no doubt that she would easily get out of his clutches before long.

Then she had found out that he was not what he seemed, and she would henceforth have a hold on him that would act as a check on his disposition to annoy her with his protestations of love.

While Kitten's reflections ran thus as she ate her meal, Quaker Hi, who had dropped into the chair before the *escritoire*, was watching her and turning over certain plans in his mind.

His story can be told in a few words.

The old Wallace he had referred to in a former chapter had been the employer of a scheming man of the world, named Leonard Bolton, who had finally gained entire control of the old gentleman's large dry-goods business in Chicago.

In due course the latter died and when the affairs of the estate had been closed up and the business sold out in accordance with the late owner's written directions left in the hands of his lawyers, it was found that he had left a rather curious will which was produced by Leonard Bolton from an old oaken *escritoire* that had been Mr. Wallace's usual receptacle for his important papers.

The will, which was dated a year before his death, left everything to his faithful employee, Leonard Bolton. It was a long document, full of legal verbiage, for the old gentleman had studied law in his youth, and prided himself on his knowledge of the forms of legal instruments, but there was no doubt about the main point, and in due time Leonard Bolton took possession of his legacy, and found himself in the city of Chicago, in possession of \$500,000 in cash, besides considerable real estate.

But there was one thing that troubled him, though his friends—and, like all rich men, he had plenty of them—thought him the luckiest and happiest fellow in the world, as he entertained them in his luxurious suite of rooms in the Palmer House.

Leonard Bolton, in searching through the *escritoire*, had discovered another will. It was of later date than that by which he had obtained possession of his wealth, and left everything to the testator's granddaughter, Kate Vernon, the daughter of his son, Henri Vernon, whom he had disinherited when the latter married the beautiful but penniless clerk in his father's store twenty years before.

This will Leonard had kept carefully secreted in a trunk at his hotel for six months, and then—it was stolen.

Some ordinary hotel thief had broken into his rooms in his absence, and had, with a quantity of jewelry and other articles of value, stolen the precious will.

The knowledge that this will was in existence, and might be produced at any moment to reduce him to beggary, was the haunting horror of Leonard Bolton's life.

For months he could gain no clew to the thief. Then he heard something that induced him to suddenly disappear from his hotel one night, saying that he would be absent for perhaps a year.

A few days later, as Hiram Placid, the Quaker, he dropped off the stage-coach at Slippery Elm, staked out a claim in the mountains, and entered on his new life as a miner, with his eyes and ears wide open.

"I am sure that's the girl," he reflected, as Kitten poured out another cup of coffee. "I have followed up the trail carefully. Strange that that blackguard, Nat Grute, should have got hold of the will as well as the girl. Well, I must get both. Then I shall be all right. Let me once marry her, and then what belongs to her will belong to me. If she won't marry me, why, there's a clause in that will providing that in case of her death, or in case she can't be found, the property goes to Leonard Bolton."

He turt into a harsh chuckle as his thoughts reached this point.

Kitten nearly dropped her cup at the sudden noise.

"What are you making that row for, Hiram?" she asked. "I don't see anything to laugh at."

"Nay, 'twas nothing, sister Kitten," returned Quaker Hi, meekly. "Only a slight catching in my throat, that's all. Yea, verily."

He was spreading out his hands in a deprecatory manner, when, suddenly, he dropped the Quaker humility and springing upon Kitten, put one of his hands over her mouth, and held her in a grasp of iron.

"Don't say a word! Don't whisper!" he hissed.

Kitten struggled, but to no purpose. In Quaker Hi's lank form there were hidden the sinews of an athlete.

His quick ears had caught a sound that warned him of impending danger. He had heard footsteps over his head, followed by voices.

His cave was so arranged that he had no fear of discovery, unless a noise were made to guide them to the spot.

Kitten tried with all her strength to release herself from Hiram's hold.

She had recognized the voices as those of her father and Pudge. Could she but utter one scream, they would rescue her!

Though there was not much affection between them and herself, she knew that they would not allow her to be ill-treated by any one else. They reserved that privilege to themselves.

Quaker Hi knew it, too, and he tightened his grip on the girl.

"Wonder if she hasn't fallen over this bluff, dad," Pudge was saying. "Just like her if she has."

"Well, we'll soon see, Pudge," growled Nat Grute's voice. "Ketch a hold of the bush, an' let yerself down. Then you can crawl up this hyar slope an' look over."

"Curse him! If he does, we are discovered," hissed Hiram Placid. "He will look right down that trap into my face."

He listened intently, and heard the rustling of the bush as Pudge grasped it and let himself down.

He was coming up the slope!
"If he sees us, I'll kill you!" whispered Hiram into Kitten's ear, fiercely.

Kitten tried to toss her head defiantly, as she saw the fingers of Pudge appear over the edge of the opening above her, as he pulled himself up to it to look over.

CHAPTER VI.

A DISTURBED NIGHT IN SLIPPERY ELM HOTEL.

We must return to Peachblossom, whom we last saw enjoying the discomfiture of Nat Grute and Pudge, in the bedroom at the Slippery Elm Hotel.

When he so suddenly burst upon them at the moment that the valise revealed its explosive nature, he had no particular feeling save that of amusement.

He had known the character of his host pretty well all along, and was fully prepared for some such unlawful proceeding as he had now nipped in the bud.

Beneath his careless exterior, the young drummer hid a nerve of iron and a determination that nothing could shake.

It is not necessary to say that he had a purpose in visiting Slippery Elm very different to that which he had given—a desire to see the country.

Old Wallace's will, of which the reader already knows something, was the object of his search, and he believed that it was in the possession of Nat Grute.

"Gentlemen, I am afraid that valise was a little too much for your nerves," he went on, coolly, as Nat Grute and Pudge tried to pull themselves together in the corner of the room.

"I—I wuz jist a-tryin' to fix things more comfortable 'round hyar, stammered Nat, "an' Pudge wuz a-helpin' me, when thet thar durned gripsack blew up an' knocked us both silly."

"So I see," returned the drummer, dryly. "Well, well, I have no doubt you meant well. But I should like to be alone now. I want to go to bed. Seems to me you keep rather late hours around this hotel. Good-night, Mr. Grute."

As he spoke he seized the ruffian by the back of the neck and threw him through the doorway, helping him with a lusty kick that jarred his framework from stem to stern.

Ere Pudge had recovered from his surprise at this cavalier treatment of his respected parent, he, too, was lifted from his corner and bundled out in the same unceremonious fashion.

"Good-night, gentlemen. Sorry I couldn't ask you to stay a little longer," was Peachblossom's mocking assurance, as he closed the bedroom door and bolted it securely, though not before he had caught a hasty glimpse of Kitten's surprised face peeping from the partially-opened doorway of her room.

"Don't know how it is," soliloquized Peachblossom, "but I feel a strange interest in that girl. She is different from anything I ever saw in a ranch like this before, in spite of her old dress and uncombed hair. However, I am too tired to bother any more about it now," he added, with a yawn. "I'll take a sleep, and try and solve the mystery at some other time, when I feel my brain fresh and clear."

He picked up the valise with a smile, and rearranging a little machine, not bigger than a good-sized pill-box, that lay snugly in its own small compartment, replaced the bag on the table.

"Pretty nearly scared those blackguards out of their lives," he muttered, softly. "Not the first time that combination and the electrode have served me in good stead."

He looked toward the corner of the room where the carpet had been carefully drawn over the hole in the floor by Pudge, shrugged his shoulders, and—kept away from it!

In ten minutes he was in bed and sound asleep, with his two handsomely-mounted "Colt's sixes" under his pillow ready to his hands.

In the mean time the father and son were staring blankly into each other's faces by the light of the blinking candle.

"What d'ye think of thet thar rooster, dad? Ain't he a daisy?" questioned Pudge. "Durned ef he didn't put you out o' thet room jist too quick!"

Pudge laughed as he spoke. In his enjoyment of his father's discomfiture, he totally forgot that he had himself been handled rather roughly.

"Shut yer durned silly mouth, will yer, or I'll break yer jaw!" sparled Grute. "Wait till he goes ter sleep, an' I'll show yer somethin'."

"Well, ef he don't go ter sleep quick, it'll be time to open up the saloon ag'in afore you can show me anythin', dad. It'll be daylight in another hour or two," answered Pudge.

"Git into yer bunk under thar, an' I'll call yer when I want yer," was Nat's response.

Without another word, Pudge rolled into his bed under the bar, and, curling up hedgehog fashion, was snoring comfortably in less than five minutes.

He was used to being disturbed, and to making the most of his time when he was permitted to seek the retirement of his couch.

Grute helped himself to his fifth drink of

whisky that night, and, sitting on a table, composed himself to wait until Peachblossom should be asleep.

For fifteen minutes he sat on his table. Then he crept softly to the drummer's door and listened.

"He's asleep. I can hear him breathing slow and steady. A man can't imitate that sort of breathing when he's awake, no matter how smart he is," remarked the old villain, mentally.

He tried the handle of the door. It turned in his hand, but the door, as he had supposed, was bolted.

"I'll soon fix that!" he decided.

Drawing a bowie-knife from the inside of his rough blue shirt, he dexterously inserted the blade, and noiselessly slipped the bolt back.

"Pudge!"

"Hallo!"

"Come here!"

"All right," answered Pudge, sleepily, as he stood by the side of his honored parent, rubbing his eyes. "What d'ye want?"

"When I open this door, you crawl in, grab that valise and bring it out."

"An' what are you goin' ter do?"

"I'll stay hyar."

"Oh! An' I'm to go in an' grab thet thar valise, thet is liable to blow up ez soon ez it is teched, while you stay out hyar and laugh at me? Not much, dad! Not much!"

Nat seized the lad by the back of the neck and shook him savagely.

"Do ez I tell yer. Thar ain't no danger, ez long ez yer handle it keerfully. An' I'm bound to hev thet pile afore he gits out o' here. Ef he wakes up, I'll be in thar an' help yer, an' we'll hev him down in the cellar with the lid over him afore he knows whar he is."

"Mighty good plan, dad, but I don't like it. He's too spry fer my taste, an' ef he wakes up, he'll lay us both out, like he did afore," grumbled Pudge.

"Not while I hev this in my hand," hissed Nat Grute, as he shook his gleaming bowie-knife at the door.

Pudge drew his own knife, and said resignedly:

"Well, open the door, dad, I'll make a stagger at it, anyhow."

"Thet's right, Pudge; you'll do credit ter yer dad yet," responded Nat, with a grin.

Gently he pushed the door a little way open and glanced inside at the young drummer, who lay peacefully sleeping on the bed, with the light of a burning candle on the table falling across his blonde mustache and handsome features.

"Now, Pudge, in with yer!"

The boy crept into the room and stood by the side of the bed looking into Peachblossom's face.

The sleeper, completely overcome by the excitement of the day and the many hours he had passed since he had last slumbered, remained motionless and utterly unconscious of danger.

He had such confidence in his own ability to circumvent any roguery on the part of Grute and his son that he had dropped to sleep without troubling himself about them.

His security was hence more fancied than real.

"Hurry up, Pudge, an' get that valise," ordered Nat, in a savage whisper.

"Hold yer horses, dad. There ain't no hurry. An' I don't propose to monkey with thet thar grip unless I'm sure it's safe."

"It's quite safe, I tell you," returned Nat.

Pudge did not reply. He was busy.

Young as he was, the boy had had plenty of experience, and he felt sure that the drummer's weapons were somewhere close to his hand.

Before he took the risk that was necessarily associated with the removal of the valise, he wanted to make sure that the drummer was disarmed, so that he would be at a disadvantage in case he awoke.

Stealthily Pudge put forth his hand toward the pillow under Peachblossom's head, scarcely breathing for fear he should disturb him.

The boy had replaced his bowie-knife in his belt and had slung a short, heavily-loaded handy-billy over his wrist instead.

He touched the pillow and slipped his hand beneath it, giving utterance to a very faint grunt of satisfaction.

He felt the butt of a pistol.

Cautiously he tugged at the hidden weapon, but could not move it. The weight of the drummer's head upon the pillow held it fast.

"Oh, get that valise, or I'll come in fer it myself," whispered Nat Grute impatiently.

No reply from Pudge save a triumphant wave of his hand holding one of Peachblossom's revolvers.

"Now, grab it an' come," whispered Grute.

"He can't hurt yer ef he does wake."

"Can't he? He's got another," returned Pudge, shaping the words with his lips without making any sound.

The boy thrust his hand under the pillow rather more boldly than before and touched the butt of Peachblossom's other pistol.

It was wedged fast under the drummer's

shoulder, and a rather sharp tug failed to stir it.

Nat Grute, unable to control his impatience, stole softly into the room and stood by the side of his hopeful son.

"Look out, dad! Don't stand here. Collar the valise and get out," whispered Pudge, with a grin.

Nat clinched his fist as if he would strike the boy for his suggestion. He had a wholesome terror of the valise, and would not have moved it from the table for twice the wealth he believed it to contain.

The boy leaned further over the bed to get a better hold on the pistol, with his face within a few inches of that of the sleeper.

Another pull at the pistol, and—Peachblossom opened his eyes!

CHAPTER VII.

DAN WALKER TAKES A HAND.

FOR an instant the three occupants of Peachblossom's room did not move or speak.

Pudge was literally mesmerized by the dark eyes of the drummer, and stood stupidly gazing down at him as if waiting for a suggestion from some one as to his next proceeding.

Nat Grute was equally affected, and seemed turned to stone—or rather to wood.

Then there was a shock, as Peachblossom, springing out of bed, grasped both father and son, and, with a superhuman effort, sent the former flying across the room to the spot where the open flooring was concealed by the carpet.

With a yell, the father dropped through into the darkness.

It was easy for the drummer to disarm the son. Holding the boy with his left hand, he speedily took from him his knife, handy-billy and the silver-mounted pistol that had been taken from the bed.

"I don't know exactly what to do with you," said Peachblossom, reflectively. "I suppose I should be perfectly justified in killing you, as I would a young rat—"

"Kill, and be durned!" gurgled the boy, defiantly, as he writhed in the terrible throat-grip of the young drummer.

Peachblossom shook him a little to quiet him, and went on:

"Guess I'd better put you down below there with your father. I'll just throw you down. If you break your neck it won't matter much, and if you don't, why, at all events, you'll be safe for a while."

In spite of Pudge's struggles, he was dragged to the hole that he and his father had arranged as a trap for the drummer, and suspended over the noisome cavern.

"I guess it won't hurt you any more than it would me," suggested Peachblossom.

"I ain't afraid of being hurt; but what good will it do yer to dump me in hyar?" asked the boy.

"Well, it will enable me to get a little rest, that's all. I don't want to be disturbed every ten minutes or so when I am trying to sleep. You and that exceedingly polished father of yours seem to have a code of etiquette of your own that is rather embarrassing to a stranger. I am not accustomed to entertaining gentlemen in my bedroom at all hours of the night and early morning."

Peachblossom spoke in the careless, good-humored drawl habitual to him, holding the boy over the open trap the while, apparently without the least exertion.

"Call your father," he added. "See whether he's alive."

"Hallo, dad! how goes it?" cried Pudge, as he tried to pierce the gloom of the well.

"Well, what yer want?" came back Grute's voice in disgusted tones.

"This hyar rooster wants ter know whether you are dead, that's all."

"Dead nawthin'" returned Nat. "But ef he knows what's good fer himself, he'll git me out o' hyar; right quick, too."

"That's a matter of opinion, friend Grute. I don't think I shall disturb you till I turn you over to the sheriff of the county!" declared Peachblossom airily. "Attempted robbery and murder are punishable offenses in the State of Colorado, I believe, and also believe that that is what your performances to-night would be called in legal parlance."

"Ther sheriff's er friend o' mine, an' I control a hundred votes in Slippery Elm!" retorted Nat Grute doggedly.

"Well, we will not discuss the question any longer," and Peachblossom lowered the kicking Pudge as far into the hole as he could reach, then dropped him.

"Ouch!" yelled Grute from below.

"What is the matter, Mr. Grute?" asked Peachblossom politely.

"Matter! You dropped this hyar durned kid right on my head, thet's all."

"What are yer growling at?" broke in the voice of Pudge. "It's a durned sight worse for me than for you. I nearly broke me jaw fallin' on yer."

"Settle it yourselves, gentlemen," said the drummer. "These little incidents will happen occasionally to people in your business. Good-morning!"

He shut the trap over the hole, pulled the carpet straight to hide the trap, and, throwing himself on the bed once more, slept soundly until the day was far advanced.

"Now, dad and Pudge deserve just what they got," observed Kitten softly, as she glanced through the partly-opened door at the sleeping Peachblossom, for the young man, knowing that he had Grute and Pudge secured, did not take the trouble to close the door.

The young girl, as we know, had been awakened by the disturbances, and had hovered around the doorway during the whole time that her father and brother had been occupied with the drummer.

She did not dare to show herself, however, for she knew that if she did her father would treat her roughly, and that the young drummer would take her part, with the probable result of bloodshed, and perhaps death to some one.

Now, however, when Nat and Pudge had been caught in their own trap, she felt that the time had come for her to take action.

"He's the nicest young man I ever saw," was Kitten's mental comment, "but I shouldn't like him to kill dad or Pudge. They're bad enough, I know, but still they're always pretty good to me."

She pulled the door shut very gently and walked to the bar.

"Almost time to open up. Dan Walker will be here for his eye-opener pretty soon, I s'pose. He's generally the first customer."

She smiled slightly as a muffled knocking behind the bar struck her ear.

"Yes, I hear you; but you can stay there a little while; I'm too busy to tend to you now," she murmured.

She wiped the tables with a damp cloth, washed the glasses that, scattered about the bar, were suggestive of anything but tidiness, and arranged the bottles neatly on the shelves behind.

"That's better. The place begins to look almost decent," she said, as she regarded the effect of her work, complacently.

A broom in her hands soon swept the floor and removed the fragments of the bottle that had been thrown at her by her brutal father.

Kitten did not seem to be hurt as the glass splinters brought the episode to her memory. She was used to her rough life, and did not think of the possibility of any other. She had dodged bottles and other missiles dozens of times.

The muffled thumping behind the bar had never ceased since it began.

"All right. I'm coming," said Kitten, apostrophizing the thumper, whoever it was, under her breath.

Looking at the door of Peachblossom's room, to make sure that it was closed, Kitten walked behind the bar and pulled the blankets and mattress from Pudge's bunk.

The thumping seemed to come from underneath, and could now be heard more distinctly.

Kitten stooped, and shooting back a bolt that fastened the board forming Podge's bedstead to the bar, pulled the board out, revealing a hole in the floor up which the voices of Nat Grute and Pudge came simultaneously.

"Why in thunder didn't yer come afore?" demanded her father.

"Yes, what's the matter with yer?" added Pudge.

"Shet yer mouth," vociferated Grute. "You've done enough mischief for one day, an' I don't want to hear anythin' more outen yer. D'ye hear?"

While Nat and Pudge had been quarreling in the darkness, invisible to Kitten, the girl had been dragging a rope ladder from a place of concealment.

She let it down the hole, fastening it to the floor by two large iron hooks with which it was furnished.

"Got it, dad?" she inquired.

There was no answer, but the rope tightened and shook, thus giving evidence that somebody was climbing the ladder.

The forbidding countenance of Nat Grute soon appeared above the floor, blood and dirt frescoing it in all directions.

He did not say anything as he crawled out of the hole and watched to see his son follow him.

Pudge came out in comparatively good condition. He was dirty, certainly, but unhurt, there being no blood-stains upon him, as upon his father.

Nate Grute looked him over and then taking his favorite bottle from a shelf, helped himself to a deep draught of whisky.

Kitten and Pudge quickly replaced the bed and hid the hole.

"Now, what, dad?" said Pudge, as Kitten stepped toward the door leading into the street as if to undo the fastenings.

"Let that thar door alone, Kitten. D'ye hyar?" growled Nat.

"All right, dad. You are the boss," assented Kitten, carelessly, as she pushed back the bolts and turned the key unobserved by her father. Kitten always had her own way when she could get it.

"You just bet I am, an' I'll teach that thar

young squirt in thar, too," said Nat, savagely, as he put the bottle to his mouth again.

He dashed the bottle on the bar, and, drawing the knife which he had kept in his belt all the time, sprang toward the door of Peachblossom's room.

Like a flash Kitten had gained the spot first and stood between him and the door, with a knife in her uplifted hand.

"Stand back, dad! You sha'n't interfere with him again. He's too much for you and Pudge, anyhow, and even if he wasn't you shouldn't go near him. I have something to say, now!"

"What have you got to say ef I told yer to shet up?" asked Nat Grute, sneeringly. "Ain't yer my daughter, an' can't I do as I like with my own, eh? Git away from that thar door. I'm going to kill that drummer!"

He grasped the girl by the arm and flung her roughly aside.

Then, ere he could reach the drummer's door again he felt himself pinned by two powerful arms behind, and heard a voice say:

"Hold on, thar, Nat! You've been drinking too early this mornin'. Come an' give me my cocktail an' behave yerself!"

"Let go my arm, Dan Walker, or some one will get hurt!" yelled Nat Grute, in a perfect frenzy, as he struggled in the miner's powerful grasp.

"Believe you're right, Mr. Grute. Somebody will get hurt if this hotel isn't conducted a little more respectably," said a gentle voice, as Peachblossom, serene and smiling, appeared in the doorway.

CHAPTER VIII.

PEACHBLOSSOM DOES SOME FANCY SHOOTING.

"ARE—are you the devil?" demanded Nat Grute, still trying to get away from Dan Walker, as he looked in open-eyed astonishment at the drummer. "I never see sich er galoot fer ketchin' on ter a man's intentions. Allers awake when yer ought ter be sleepin'!"

"Let him go, Dan. He is safe enough now. He would not hurt me if he could," said Peachblossom, carelessly.

"Dunno 'bout that," was Dan Walker's reply. "Nat Grute is an ugly feller when he gits mad. Howsumever, I guess you kin handle him, even ef he does go fer yer," and, so saying, Dan released the ruffian and stood back to watch the fun.

To his surprise the surly landlord only walked behind the bar, while the drummer seated himself on a corner of a table, and trimmed his nails with a small penknife.

"What'll you drink, Dan?" asked the drummer.

"Ther usual! Mix it fer me, Nat, and put a little extray strength into it. You've kinder knocked my narves this mornin', with yer cuttin' up."

Peachblossom smiled. He already knew Dan Walker well enough to understand that he could always find an excuse for ordering a "little extray strength" in his drink.

Grute went sulkily about the work of mixing the cocktail, and soon set the liquor before Dan, who swallowed it at a gulp, like a liquid pill, making a very wry face afterward, as if the medicine were very disagreeable.

"What time will breakfast be ready, Nat? I did not sleep very well last night, and I shall be glad of a good meal," remarked the drummer, airily.

"Kitten, git breakfast, d'ye hyar?" howled Nat, without looking at the drummer.

"All right, dad. What does the gentleman want?" returned Kitten. "Beefsteakporksteak vealcutletlambchophamandeggsliverandbacon—friedoystersandfish!"

This long list of hotel dainties was rattled off by Kitten in one breath and without any stops.

She would probably have recited the names of a few more dishes, had not her father raised an empty bottle threateningly and yelled at her to "Shut yer mouth!"

"All right, dad, it's shut. But, I must ask him what he'll have," said Kitten, with a mischievous smile.

"Cook him some beefsteak and coffee. Ef he don't like that, why, let him change his hotel. Thet's all," snarled Nat.

Peachblossom strolled into his room while Kitten cooked the breakfast, and Dan Walker stood on the street outside the hotel, enjoying his morning smoke, and exchanging an occasional greeting with the Slippery Elmites who dropped in for the "bracer" that they considered a necessary preparation for the labors of the day with pick and pannikin.

Nat served them surlily, and could not be drawn into any conversation. But he was not a man of many social qualities, and no one noticed that he was any more disagreeable than usual.

In due time Kitten put the viands on one of the rough tables, for the bar-room of the Slippery Elm Hotel was also the dining-room.

Then she rung a loud bell in a very ostentatious manner, and stood back as Dan Walker and Pudge took their places.

"Breakfast ready?" asked Peachblossom, as

he came smilingly from his room and took his seat, with his back to the bar.

All three of the men at the table—Dan, Pudge and Peachblossom—kept on their hats while taking breakfast. The etiquette in Slippery Elm was not very irksome, and a man who took off his hat while eating would be stigmatized as a very offensive tenderfoot.

Kitten waited upon the table in a desultory fashion, wiping plates with her apron, breathing on cups to make them polish, and drinking the coffee remaining in the bottom of the drummer's cup before refilling it.

She occasionally replaced the slices of bread on the general plate with her brown hands, and exhibited a familiarity with the food that would have been rather embarrassing to a stickler for the strict refinements of polite society.

As it happened, however, there was no one at the table inclined to be critical with poor Kitten, the drummer especially receiving her attentions to his comfort in the spirit in which they were offered, and recognizing the good intentions that were hardly clouded by her lack of experience.

Dan Walker and Pudge did not trouble themselves to make any reflections. They each had enough to do to satisfy their hunger, and ate as if breakfast came to them not oftener than once a year.

Kitten had just gone with Dan Walker's cup to get him some more coffee for the fourth time, and Pudge was bending down over his plate in the act of wrestling with an unusually tough piece of steak, when a pistol-shot rung out in the room, and Peachblossom, a smoking revolver in his hand, turned half-round in his chair and smiled at Nat Grute.

The latter held in his hand the neck of a bottle, the rest of it being scattered in splinters over the bar.

"I thought I could hit it, Nat; but, really, I wish you would stop your fooling," remarked Peachblossom, quietly, as he twisted his blonde mustache tenderly with his left hand.

Nat stood still without a word, as he looked in a stupefied way from the drummer's revolver to the fragment of bottle in his own hand.

He might be forgiven for his astonishment. He had been leaning on the bar, watching the young man malignantly. The longer he looked at him the more determined he became to have revenge on this innocent-looking tenderfoot from the East.

Meanwhile the drummer, with his back to his enemy, was disposing of his breakfast with a zest that told of a good digestion and a clear conscience.

"Curse him! How easily I could knock his durned brains out, right hyar!" thought Grute, as he clutched the neck of the bottle on the bar before him.

The apparently unconscious drummer kept on with his breakfast, while Nat Grute's grasp on the bottle grew tighter.

"Yes, I kin give him one tap with this hyar bottle, an' he's gone," thought Nat. "O' course Dan 'd put his oar in, but I could soon squar' it with him. I'd tell him this hyar feller's a claim shark, and that 'd be enough for Dan."

He gritted his teeth as he raised the bottle and poised it in his hand ready for a good aim.

His brow grew darker with the fury of intended murder. He took deliberate aim at the back of the young man's head, intending to strike him at the back of the left ear.

There was no one to watch him. Both Dan and Pudge were too busy to notice him, and Peachblossom himself was facing in the opposite direction.

"Now, to get even!" he hissed.

He swung the bottle over his head, when, like a flash, Peachblossom, without turning around or changing the position of his body in any way, drew one of his silver-mounted six-shooters, and resting it on his right shoulder, with the muzzle in the direction of Grute, pulled the trigger.

The bullet hit the bottle squarely, smashing it into a thousand splinters and leaving the neck still clutched in the dumfounded Grute's hand.

"Wal, what in natur' are yer doin', young feller?" asked Dan Walker, springing to his feet. "Thet ain't very perlite, to git shootin' off yer gun at ther breakfast table."

"I beg your pardon, Dan. I did not mean to do it, but that bottle made such a splendid target that I couldn't resist the temptation. I hope I have not disturbed you, Mr. Grute," went on the drummer with sarcastic politeness.

Nat Grute's face was a study. Rage, surprise, and a superstitious terror that he could not repress, were all apparent in his lowering countenance.

"How—how did yer see behind yer; that's what I want ter know?" he whispered, hoarsely. "I had the bottle all ready ter—"

"That will do, Mr. Grute, interrupted the drummer. "Do not say any more or you may compromise yourself which would be a pity. It is enough for you to know that I can eucher treachery every time."

There was a sternness in the tones that was not lost on the brute.

He brushed the splintered glass from the bar, but did not address another remark to the drummer, as the latter arose from the table, and, lighting a cigar, again walked into his own room and closed the door.

CHAPTER IX.

GRUTE SOWS A SEED OF SUSPICION.

LEST the reader may share with Nat Grute the erroneous impression that Peachblossom was blessed with supernatural powers that enabled him to know of things that he could not see, an explanation of his ability to detect treachery behind him may be given.

Under the rim of his hat, which it will be remembered he wore during his meal, was arranged a small mirror, placed at such an angle as to show him all that was going on behind him in his immediate vicinity.

All through his breakfast the drummer had, by means of his little mirror, kept his eye on Grute's movements, and was therefore prepared to meet any hostile demonstration promptly and effectively.

Ever ready with the pistol and an expert in shooting, he had easily fired over his shoulder and defeated the landlord's amiable intention of breaking his skull.

Kitten quickly removed all traces of the meal, and then, without a word to anybody, started for a walk over the mountains, where, as we already know, she met with enough adventure to prevent the excursion becoming monotonous.

"Let me see," said Peachblossom to himself, as he sat on the side of his bed and puffed reflectively at his cigar, while his countenance assumed a more serious expression than he often allowed it to show in public. "What shall I do next? I have got so far as to have a pretty close guess where that paper is, but how am I to get it? That's the question."

He took from his inside vest-pocket a pocket-book from which he drew forth an old letter in an envelope.

"Yes, here it is," he continued, glancing down the letter. "The last directions from poor Henri, to find his girl and restore to her her rights. Strange that the old man should have made that will just after the child was stolen, and still stranger that he should have let her parents know on their death-beds that he had made the will. If they had only lived! Ah, well! The cholera is no respecter of persons, and perhaps after all it was better that Henri and Kate Vernon should have died together. They escaped the misery of mourning for each other, anyhow."

The drummer was disturbed in his reflections at this point by Dan Walker's voice, raised threateningly, and, half-suspecting the cause, he replaced his letter and pocket-book hastily in his vest and went out to see.

Nat Grute was still standing behind the bar, favoring Peachblossom with an evil scowl as he passed out.

"Yer durned coyote! What d'ye mean by showin' yerself aroun' hyar ag'in? Didn't I tell yer that it 'ud be unhealt'y fer yer to show yerself in this hyar camp any more? Durned ef I don't plug yer full o' holes fer the fun of ther thing anyhow!"

It was Dan Walker that was talking in this belligerent way outside and the drummer quickly opened the door and stepped between the irascible miner and a man who stood in the street with his hands up and watching Dan Walker's six-shooter nervously.

"Hold on, there, Dan," said Peachblossom, sweetly. "Seems to me your fingers must have the trigger-itch this morning. What's he been doing?"

"Yes, what have I been doin'?" put in the other man, who was none other than Red Bill, as he stole his right hand toward his belt.

"Hands up there, Bill!" said Peachblossom, sharply. "When I want you to shoot, I'll tell you. Try and do it before and I'll blow the top of your head off. You understand?"

"In course I understands," grumbled the discomfited Bill, "but yer needn't be quite so short with a man."

"Let me git at him," raved Dan Walker, whose morning potations had made him only too anxious to fight. "Let me git at ther sneakin' cuss!"

"Dan, Red Bill is under my care. I'll guarantee that he don't play any tricks on the boys, but I don't want you to interfere with him whenever you happen to see him. I'll be answerable for his conduct. Come on, Bill, I want to talk to you," he added, as he walked away, with Red Bill at his heels.

"Wal, durn my skin ef that thar youngster ain't got er way with him that beats anythin' I ever see'd," said Dan Walker, as he stood, pistol still in hand, watching the two men walk away.

"Yes, an' he's a-foolin' yer, too," hissed a savage voice in his ear.

Nat Grute stood in the doorway, his malevolent face appearing above Dan Walker's shoulder, as he too looked after Peachblossom and Red Bill.

"What d'ye mean by foolin' me?" interrogated Dan, angrily, for he did not like the insinuation that he could be fooled by anybody.

"Haw! Haw!" laughed Pudge, who had been leaning against the wall enjoying the scene intensely. He did not care who was hurt as long as there was a quarrel and fight to afford him amusement.

"What do I mean?" repeated Nat with a grin. "Yes, what d'ye mean? You're allers a-sayin' myster'us things an' consarn me ef I onderstand yer half the time," responded Dan Walker, impatiently.

"Wal, what d'ye think o' that thar Red Bill?" asked Nat Grute.

"Think? What should I think? He's a durned ornary cuss, not good enough to die with his boots on 'cept at the end of a rope. That's what I think of him."

"Zactly!" acquiesced Nat.

"That's what!" put in Pudge.

"But what's that got ter do with it?" asked Dan. "Peachblossom ain't Red Bill."

"No, but—"

"But what? Why don't yer—"

"Do honest men go pardners with sneak thieves Dan?" went on Nate Grute in low, but significant tones, tapping Dan Walker's shoulder at each end.

Dan started, and looked with blazing eyes at Nat Grute.

"D'ye mean to say that—"

"I don't mean ter say nothin', if yer look at me thet thar way," returned Nat Grute, sulkily, as he turned to go inside.

Dan stared at him as if dazed, which indeed he was.

He could not realize that this bright, handsome young drummer, who seemed the personification of openness and honor, could be the character that Nat Grute intimated.

Pudge grinned delightedly.

"Hold on thar, Nat. Let's think about this hyar thing," said Dan.

Nat Grute allowed the shadow of a smile to steal across his mouth as he turned toward Walker.

"What d'ye think this young feller's game is, then?" asked the miner.

"How should I know?" returned Nat. "Praps he's all right. You think he is, anyhow, don't yer?"

Now that he had awakened the miner's suspicions, he felt it safe to tantalize him a little.

"Never mind about thet, Nat Grute. I want yer ter tell me what yer think he is. Ef he's anythin' but a squar' man, I'll lay him out sure ez my name is Dan Walker. An' I'd do it ef he wuz my own brother."

The miner gritted his teeth and ground his heel savagely into the dust, as he thus delivered himself, and Nat Grute again grinned to himself.

"He's all right now," he muttered, "an' I'll get away with that durned drummer yet."

"You don't think that the kid's a sneak-thief, like Red Bill and his gang, do yer?" demanded Dan Walker.

"No, but I do think he's wuss than thet."

"Wuss?"

"Yes."

"Well, what? A poker sharp?"

"Wuss."

"Wuss than that?"

"Yes."

"What—a hoss-thief?"

"Wuss."

"Wuss than that?"

"Yes."

"I don't know anythin' wuss than that, and I guess you're lyin', Nat Grute," said Dan Walker, impatiently. "I'm tired of tryin' to find out what you think he is, and it don't matter much, anyhow. I believe he's squar', an' I'm goin' to believe it until I hears somethin' very straight to the contrary."

The miner put his pistol in his belt, after giving Pudge a playful, but rather hard, tap on the head with it, and, stretching himself, added:

"Nat, give me a drink. I haven't had one for 'most half an hour, an' I'm as dry as chalk."

"Shall I tell yer what thet thar drummer is, first, Dan?" growled Nat Grute.

"Yes, but hurry up," said Dan, carelessly.

The surly landlord of Slippery Elm whispered two words in Dan Walker's ear.

The miner started back, and instinctively his right hand sought the butt of his revolver.

"D'ye mean that?"

Nat Grute nodded.

"You're sure of it, are yer?"

"Not quite, but I'd bet my pile on it," returned Nat, confidently.

"Give me a drink, right away," said Dan Walker, as he walked quickly into the bar-room, closely followed by Nat and the grinning Pudge.

The drink was served and swallowed, and then Dan, pulling his hat down over his brows, went toward the door, with savage determination written on his countenance.

"Where are yer goin', Dan?" asked Nat, insinuatingly, as he furtively watched the miner from beneath his shaggy eyebrows.

"Never mind! You'll hear about it later on," hissed Dan Walker. "I'm er goin' to meet

thet thar young drummer, an' ef he don't prove thet you are a liar, why—"

He did not finish the sentence but his clinched fist said "murder" as plainly as words, as he passed through the doorway and shut the door with a bang.

"Whar's Kitten?" asked Nat, as Dan disappeared.

"Guess she's gone up into the mountains to meet ther drummer man. She's mashed on him, any one can see that!" said Pudge, maliciously.

"What?" howled Nat. "I'll find her and break her neck. She wants to give me away ter him, I know. If it hadn't been for her we'd ha' cleaned him out afore this. She's just gone ter tell him secrets about me and the house. Come on, Pudge. Shut up the house. She can't be very far away. We'll bring her right back an' I'll keep her locked up for a while."

"Oh, I don't think it's worth while, dad," objected Pudge. "She'll be back by noon. She often goes out that way for a few hours. I only said that about the drummer just for fun."

"Never mind. I don't trust her now," growled Nat Grute. "I can't afford ter trust anybody at this stage of the game."

He pushed Pudge into the street as he spoke, and going out himself shut and locked the door after him, leaving the hotel to take care of itself while he and his hopeful son took their way to the mountains in search of Kitten.

CHAPTER X.

KITTEN EXPLORES IN THE DARK.

WE left Kitten in Quaker Hi's cave, with its owner's grasp tightening on her and his voice whispering threats into her ear.

She saw the hands of Pudge appear at the hole over her head, and with a desperate wrench, she freed herself from Hiram Placid's hold, and screamed with all her might.

At the same moment Pudge pulled himself up a little further so that she could see his rough head between herself and the blue sky.

"Pudge! Pudge!" she screamed.

"Hallo!" came the answer. "Where are you?"

"Down here! Hurry up!"

Quaker Hi, who had been looking desperately in all directions, as if seeking for some means of avoiding the inevitable discovery, suddenly made a dash for a heavy black-snake mule whip that lay in the corner and ran back to the hole, down which Pudge was peering.

The gloom of the cave was too deep for the boy to distinguish anything until his eyes became accustomed to the shadows, and Quaker Hi knew that if he could get him away now his secret hiding-place might yet be undiscovered.

With all his force he struck at the boy's fingers with the whip.

A yell of pain and Pudge disappeared.

Hiram and Kitten could hear the scraping and rattling of loose stones and sand as the boy tumbled down the slope outside.

Kitten sprung at Hiram and tried to snatch the whip from his hand.

He pushed her away with scarcely any effort.

"Sister Kitten, it is ill-beseeming in a maiden to take part in the brawlings and quarrelings of the Philistines," drawled Quaker Hi sneeringly.

"You cur!" said Kitten, in a voice of unutterable contempt.

Hiram Placid only grinned, as, by the manipulation of some ropes, he closed the openings in the ceiling of the cave, and effectually hid all traces of it from the outside.

"Now, sister Kitten, thy kinsmen may try as they will to find their way into the household of thy servant, but all their efforts shall be confounded. Yea, verily."

"What do you intend to do with me, Quaker Hi?" asked Kitten, without replying to his last speech.

"I would have from thee a promise to dwell in my tent and share with me such goods as I have been able to acquire, and to be an equal owner of my man-servant, my maid-servant, my ox and my ass, and everything that is mine, yea, verily, that would I."

"Don't talk like a fool, Hiram. You know you haven't got any of those things, and if you had I shouldn't want them. What should I do with a man-servant and a maid-servant, and an ox and an ass?"

"Verily, I did but employ a figure of speech," returned Quaker Hi, somewhat put out of countenance by the girl's matter-of-fact reply.

"Will you be my wife?" he continued, dropping the Quaker dialect.

"No," answered Kitten, promptly.

"You mean that?"

"Certainly, I mean it. I wouldn't marry you even if I were old enough to marry anybody, and you had all the gold-dust in Colorado."

"All right; then I will leave you to yourself a little while, and give you a chance to think over your prospects," said Hiram, savagely.

"Good! I would rather have my own company than yours, anyhow," returned Kitten.

Hiram Placid had lighted a lamp when he and

Kitten entered the cave, and now that the daylight was all shut out, the lamp illuminated that part of the cave in which they stood almost brilliantly.

As Kitten made her last remark, Hiram turned the light out, and the cave was in pitch darkness.

"What are you doing, Hi? What is the good of putting us in this darkness?" asked Kitten, with a ring of alarm in her voice that she could not repress, in spite of herself.

There was no answer.

"Hiram!" she repeated.

No reply, but she heard a slight noise at the spot where Quaker Hi had been standing when the light disappeared, and a rush of cool air was wafted in her direction.

"Hiram, where are you?"

"Never mind. You stay where you are, or you might run into danger," returned Hiram's voice, but muffled, as if he were in another room below her.

Then she heard a slam, as of a door or trap closing, and felt that she was alone!

Where had her captor gone and how had he got away?

For at least five minutes Kitten stood quite still, with every sense strained to the utmost.

Might not it all be a trick on the part of Quaker Hi, and might he not be still in the cave with her, ready to checkmate any move on her part to regain her liberty?

He had already shown himself to be a man of deep cunning, who, masquerading as one of a worthy and highly respected religious sect, had thrown the rough miners of Slippery Elm entirely off their guard.

Intently she listened to detect even the sound of his breathing, if he was there, but not even the faintest indication of a living presence beside her own could she hear.

"He's gone," she said at last, with a sigh of relief, "and it will be a mighty strange thing if I ain't soon gone too."

She stepped forward, and fell over the table at which she had been taking her meal.

"No wonder," she muttered. "It's the blackest darkness I was ever in. I must light that lamp. Suppose Hiram hasn't left any matches handy. Never mind, I can fix it without him. I never travel without matches in my pocket."

She fumbled at her dress, and soon had in her hand a small tin box of matches.

A scratch, and Kitten had light enough to look around her.

"Now, where is that lamp? I do believe the ornary cuss has taken it with him. It was on that table when he turned it out, I know. Ouch!"

The match in her hand had burned down to her fingers, and she dropped it suddenly.

"I have only two more left, and I'll have to be careful if I mean to have light enough to show me the way out of this. Now the question is how big is this place, and how did Hiram get away? I'll just crawl around the walls in the dark, and only light a match when I'm obliged. He has taken that lamp away, I know; but I'll get there just the same."

Kitten was not easily frightened, and now that she had laid out a plan of operation for herself, felt almost satisfied that she would find her way to liberty, if Quaker Hi would only keep away for a short time.

She dropped upon her knees and crawled cautiously through the gloom.

Feeling her way, and avoiding collision with the boxes and other things in her path by putting out her hand, she reached the rocky wall.

"Good, so far," she muttered. "Now I'll go right down the room till I reach the end opposite the entrance. Then I can crawl back on the opposite side, and try and find some way of getting out."

In the thick darkness the girl moved slowly along, touching the wall all the time to guide herself, and prevent her wandering off at a tangent.

"Seems to me this is a pretty big place. I thought I should have got to the end of it before this," she said to herself when, after half an hour's crawling, she still failed to reach any obstruction to her progress. Where is the end wall? I wonder if there is any end wall."

She crawled on and on, when suddenly she dropped down some seven or eight inches.

"Land sakes! What's this? Where am I going?"

She reached forward with one hand and found another drop of about the same distance as the first.

"Why, I do believe—"

She was too much interested in groping along to finish the sentence.

She reached forward and downward still further, and then, drawing a long breath, as she solved the problem said, softly:

"It's a flight of steps, Kitten, as sure as you're born."

Kitten was right. It was a flight of steps hewn in the rock, but where the steps led was more than she could tell in the black darkness.

"Now the question is shall I light one of my matches or not," she reflected. "I ought to see where these steps take me before I go down, and yet I don't like to waste a match just for curi-

osity. No; I'll go down in the dark and take chances."

Kitten arose to her feet and cautiously descended, counting the steps as she did so.

"Fourteen! And how cold it is down here! Well, this is the bottom, anyhow, but I don't seem to be any nearer getting out. It's damp, too, and I hate to crawl on this slimy floor."

She walked boldly forward with hands outspread until she brought up against a wall down which streams of water trickled slowly.

Placing her left hand against it, she walked along until stopped by another wall.

In this way she passed around the chamber, and found it to be about twelve feet square, and without any apparent means of egress or ingress save that afforded by the steps.

"Well, Kitten, I expect you might as well go up-stairs again," she soliloquized. "There don't seem to be anything down here."

She felt her way to the steps again and was about to go up, when she heard the sound of voices seemingly behind her.

They were not distinct, and were evidently in another apartment separated from that in which she was by a wall.

She listened intently and her heart gave a throb of hope.

Could it be possible?

She listened again, and then moved quickly in the direction of the sounds.

She could not distinguish the words, but the voice she knew, beyond question.

Peachblossom!

Yes, the young drummer, in whom she had taken such an irresistible interest, was near at hand, and she felt confident, would rescue her, if she could only make her presence known.

He was talking earnestly about something, his companion, whoever he was, only replying in monosyllables.

How to let him know that she was there and needed help.

She might scream, but then—where was Quaker Hi? Might he not be somewhere in the vicinity ready to spring upon her at the first cry?

It was not only possible, but probable.

Might he not even be the companion of the young drummer, and might not the latter be in the plot against her, whatever it was?

She dismissed this thought as soon as it entered her head. She would stake her life on the honesty and honor of the young drummer.

She reached the wall and placed her cheek against the damp surface.

Peachblossom was still talking, while his companion, occasionally throwing in a remark in a deep voice wholly unlike the oily tones of Quaker Hi, seemed to be giving close attention to the words of the speaker.

"That ain't Quaker Hi, anyhow," said Kitten decidedly, "and I don't know who it is. I don't care either, as long as Peachblossom helps me out of this. Don't seem to be any way of getting through this wall, but I must let him know that I'm here somehow."

Quick at expedients, as became a mountain-bred girl, Kitten pulled off her heavy shoes, suitable for the rough roads around her home, and commenced to beat a tattoo with their heels on the wall.

At once the voice of Peachblossom ceased.

"He hears me, that's sure," thought Kitten.

She renewed her tapping on the wall, and banged harder than ever, until she heard a responsive tapping on the other side.

"Now, if I could only talk by taps, like the telegraph, I'd be all right," said the girl to herself. "But I can't, and there is nothing for me to do but yell."

She drew her breath ready for a loud cry, and at the top of her voice shouted:

"Peachblossom! Peachblossom!"

"Hollo-o-o-o-o-o!" came back the answer.

"I'm in the cave on the other side of the—"

And then a hand was clapped over her mouth, as Quaker Hi hissed in her ear:

"Curse you! I shall have to kill you yet!"

CHAPTER IX.

QUAKER HI AND RED BILL TAKE A WALK.

KITTEN struggled vigorously, and in spite of the efforts of Quaker Hi to silence her managed to emit several half-stifled cries.

"Shut your mouth, will you?" said Hiram. "If you bring those fellows in here they will never find you alive. Mark what I say!"

"I don't care. If they don't they will make short work of you, anyhow!" returned Kitten. Then, pushing his hand away from her face, she raised her voice in a supreme effort, and shouted:

"Quaker Hi is killing me!"

With a savage oath, Hiram seized the girl by the throat and dealt her a heavy blow with his clinched fist on the back of her head.

She dropped to the floor senseless, as Quaker Hi, who was thoroughly familiar with the place, dashed up the steps in the dark.

Meanwhile the voice of Peachblossom could be heard asking Kitten to say where she was and to tell him how he could aid her.

"Yes, when thee finds thy way to sister Kitten

thee will have passed through grievous tribulation if thy servant knoweth himself," muttered Quaker Hi, as he produced the lamp from its hiding-place and lighted it.

He threw himself on one of the skin-covered boxes around the big room and reflected.

"I must get that girl out of that cellar and put her somewhere else," he muttered. "You are playing a desperate game, Leonard Bolton, and I'm afraid your reputation even as Quaker Hi is gone now, if that girl ever gets out of your power. You must either marry her, or—she must never get out."

As his thoughts reached this stage, he clinched his bony fist and regarded it curiously in the rays of the lamplight.

"Wonder how badly I hurt her. I'll go and see. It will be all the better if she does remain out of her senses for a few minutes. It will be easier to handle her."

With this philosophical remark, he stepped over to the stairs and walked quickly down into the lower apartment.

He knew the spot on which he had thrown her down with the blow of his fist, and though it was, of course, pitch dark, walked over to the corner unhesitatingly and stooped to pick up the girl.

"Strange! I must have made a mistake. I could have sworn it was right here that she dropped. She must have rolled over to one side," he said, as his hand touched the damp floor instead of Kitten, as he had expected.

He moved along a little to the right and felt all around. No Kitten!

"Darn her picture! Where is she?" grumbled Hiram.

He stepped to the left and groped about with his foot.

Still no Kitten!

Quaker Hi felt his hair standing on end under his tall hat, as he pushed his foot hurriedly hither and thither. Nothing but emptiness!

Then he made a dash for the stairs, ran up, and, seizing the lighted lamp, came down again.

One glance around, and he realized that Kitten had disappeared.

Quaker Hi shivered with a superstitious horror that he could not repress. How had she managed to get out? She certainly had not come up the stairs, and there were no doors or other means of egress in the room in which he had left her not three minutes before in an insensible state.

But she was certainly not there now, and as he did not believe in miracles, he knew that there must be some mode of leaving the lower cave that he had never discovered in the few months that he had been its tenant.

Carefully he looked at the walls on all sides, as he had many times before since he first accidentally stumbled upon the place when he took up his abode at Slippery Elm.

The result of his investigations was simply nothing. Everything seemed solid and secure—walls, floor and ceiling.

He could not reach the latter, but he held his lamp up on high and scanned it closely enough to see that it was solid rock that had apparently not been disturbed for ages.

She must be somewhere in here. She must have slipped up the stairs without my seeing her, and have hidden behind the boxes and things. I'll soon have her out of it, though. Er—yea, verily!"

Even when by himself, Quaker Hi endeavored to school himself into using the dialect of the Friends, and though, as we have seen, he frequently forgot it when stirred by strong emotions, he always caught himself up when it occurred to him, and finished his sentence with a "Yea, verily!"

He ran up the stairs again, and lamp in hand, thoroughly ransacked every corner of the cave, moving every piece of furniture it contained, in his search for the girl.

When at last he stood still, breathless, and realized that she was indeed not there, he was the picture of bewilderment.

He extinguished the lamp, and pulling one of the ropes that communicated with the traps above, let a flood of daylight into the cave.

It was getting near sunset now, and a golden shaft, tinged with red, shot down through the opening, and almost glorified the tall plug hat as Quaker Hi stood in the path of the sun's rays.

Bringing into position a light ladder, ingeniously arranged so that it slipped into a sort of recess in the ceiling when not in use, remaining hidden entirely from view, Quaker Hi ascended it until he could put his head out of the opening.

It was the hole into which Pudge had been looking when Quaker Hi hit his fingers, but Pudge had disappeared long before, and Hiram was not afraid of being seen by either him or his estimable father, Nat Grute.

Still, he wanted to make quite sure that the coast was clear before he commenced to hunt outside for Kitten.

If she wasn't inside, he argued, she must have got outside; and, anyhow, she could not have got far away, especially from such a naturally inaccessible place as his cave in the mountain.

As he looked down the slope up which Pudge had toilsomely climbed some hours ago, he raised

himself still higher above the hole through which he had thrust himself.

"She can't have gone this way, that's sure," he mused, "because the ladder had not been disturbed, and besides, I was in the room all the time. No, of course not. But which way did she go? It's a puzzler to me all around. Yea, verily!"

Shaking his head until the tall hat wobbled again, Quaker Hi was preparing to descend the ladder, when a looped rope circled above him like an exceedingly lively serpent, and settling over the tall hat, tightened around his arms and pinioned him fast.

Stiffing the oath that arose to his lips, Quaker Hi meekly observed:

"The Philistines are upon me; yea, verily."

"That's what they are, good and solid, too, bet yer boots!" responded a gruff voice. "So just come out o' this."

The rope around Hiram's arms cut into his flesh as it was jerked by some invisible power behind him, and he was in imminent danger of falling off the ladder.

"Verily, thy strength is mighty, Red Bill, (for thy voice tells me thy name,) but fain would I beg mercy at thy hands in this my hour of distress."

"Don't be so free with my name! Durn your carcass! I'd shoot yer full o' holes fer a dollar!" returned Red Bill, more gruffly than before, and he gave the rope an admonitory pull.

Hiram managed to turn round so that he could face his tormentor, and saw Red Bill standing on a huge boulder on the opposite side of a rift in the mountain, some eight or ten feet wide.

"Git out o' that, Quaker Hi, or I'll dump yer inter the gulch," continued Red Bill. "D'ye hear me squeal?"

"Friend Bill, if thou wilt explain how I can get out, seeing that I am in bondage and must bend to thy will while thou holdest me with strong ropes—yea, ropes that I cannot rend in twain."

"Oh, give us er rest!" returned Red Bill, in tones of deepest disgust. "I'll loosen that thar rope, an' then yer'll hev to jump across this hyar split in the ground. 'Yes; but look hyar," he continued, as he drew a six-shooter and covered Hiram with it; "don't try any monkey bizness, 'cause I'm a-watchin' yer, an' I'll perfrate yer in a holy second ef yer don't do 'zackly as I tells yer."

Quaker Hi had been unable to hide a look of satisfaction when Red Bill said he would loosen the rope, and this it was that caused the latter to draw his pistol and utter his warning to his prisoner.

"Yer know, Quaker Hi, I want yer for somethin', or I shouldn't hev taken the trouble to throw this hyar rope over yer head."

"But why hast thou done so, Friend Bill? Verily, I did not know thou wert my foe," said Quaker Hi, meeker than ever.

"Oh, yer didn't, eh? Yer don't remember sayin' last night that it 'ud be a good thing to hang me, do yer?" asked Red Bill, sneeringly. "Don't yer think I've got mighty good reason to be yer foe, as yer call it? But thet ain't all. I've got somethin' else ag'in' yer, an' I'm golu' to make yer kim over hyar an' settle."

Another jerk of the rope made Hiram wince, and emphasized Red Bill's remarks.

"Verily, if I fail to make a clean jump, my days will be numbered," said Quaker Hi, as he glanced at the chasm and then at the boulder upon which stood Red Bill.

"Wal, then, you'd better make a clean jump, and make it mighty quick, too," rejoined Bill, as, with a dextrous twist of his hand, he lifted the rope from the other's wrist.

Quaker Hi hesitated a moment, and then, as Red Bill kept the muzzle of his revolver ready to blow his brains out, he braced himself for a spring, and cleared the space between them at a bound.

Red Bill seized him by the hand, and pulling him up on the boulder, commanded him to jump down on the other side.

Hiram did not like it, but he saw that, under the circumstances, he must obey.

The two men were now on a narrow path, not more than two feet in width, running along the face of the precipice, which was 'n fact a continuation of the path by means of which Hiram and Kitten had reached the former's cave.

"Verily, friend William, how far must I pursue this dangerous pathway?" asked Hiram, looking back over his shoulder at Red Bill, who followed closely, pistol in hand.

"Keep on till I tell yer to stop," was the gruff rejoinder.

Quaker Hi did not say another word, but walked on, the path winding along the cliff's side until it came to an abrupt ending.

"Go on," yelled Red Bill, as Hiram stopped on the very edge of the dizzy precipice.

"Verily, I cannot go any further. The path ends here," said Hiram.

"Go on, I tell yer," said Red Bill, savagely.

"Dost thou mean to make me walk cver the edge of this place and be dashed to pieces below?" asked Hiram, as his parchment face grew several shades paler.

"I don't care a cuss whether you're dashed to pieces or not," returned Red Bill. "It's none of my funeral. But I'm a-goin' to make you step off the end of that place, that's all."

He carefully leveled his six-shooter at Hiram's breast as he spoke, as if selecting an eligible target in the latter's anatomy.

Hiram looked at his tormentor and then fearfully peered over the edge of the path, where, with the exception of a bush that grew out of the rocks a few feet below, there was nothing to prevent a sheer fall of some two thousand feet.

"Git on thar, Quaker Hi," commanded Red Bill, with a malicious grin.

Hiram slowly put out his foot, as if to obey, and then, like a flash, reached Red Bill's throat and bore him back on the narrow path, while the pistol went down the gulch, discharging itself with an echoing report as it struck a projecting rock in its descent.

CHAPTER XII.

RED BILL'S RANCH.

WHEN Peachblossom left the Slippery Elm Hotel with Red Bill at his heels he had decided on a plan of action.

He had made up his mind, from information he had acquired before he left Chicago, and which personal observation had confirmed, that the will of which he was in search, was in the possession of Nat Grute. How it had got there, he did not know, but he felt certain that the surly landlord of Slippery Elm had it hidden somewhere.

The next thing to be considered was, how to get it. He felt that he must have Kitten on his side, and then perhaps he might get an idea where Nat Grute kept the precious paper, provided that it was, as he believed, in his possession.

Kitten had gone out, doubtless up into the mountains, as he had learned was her custom. He would follow and find her, and, away from the jealous watchfulness of her brutal father, he hoped that he could enlist her in his cause.

He wanted Red Bill for a guide, and to do any laborious work that he could intrust to him.

"Bill, you say you know where this girl generally goes, do you?" he asked, as the two got out of sight of the Hotel, and Red Bill stepped to his side.

"Wal, I knows ez ther gal has a fastun of climbin' up the mule-path over thar an' gittin' 'way above creation. She likes ter feel ther wind, she says."

"Well, we'll go up the mule-path too, Bill. So go on," said Peachblossom, lightly.

Red Bill did not answer, but turning short around to the right, showed Peachblossom the path up which they were to climb.

The two traveled up the slope in silence. Peachblossom was in deep thought and Red Bill was never inclined to exert himself by unnecessary conversation.

The path was that in which Red Bill had stopped Peachblossom the night before, and when they reached the clump of firs near which Tom Riper had met his death, Red Bill and the drummer stopped and looked thoughtfully into each other's faces.

"Where is the body?" asked Peachblossom, carelessly.

"Oh, I buried it 'up the gulch a piece. I didn't want no buzzards or coyotes ter git at it. Yer see, Tom wuz a pardner o' mine, an' I wanted to do the squar' thing by his body," answered Red Bill somewhat apologetically.

"That was right. I hope you will do as much for me if I happen to pass in my checks," said the young drummer.

"No fear o' that. You ain't ther kind o' man ez stops bullets," returned Red Bill, admiringly.

Peachblossom smiled grimly at this tribute from his rough companion, as brushing a few specks of dust from his Prince Albert coat, he walked on.

"Phew!" gasped Red Bill, as he and his companion reached a ledge high up on the face of the mountain. "I'd like ter know whar thet thar gal ez got to. She ought to be hyar somewhar. But durned ef I can see a feather of her."

"Well, sit down for a moment and let us get our breath," suggested Peachblossom. "We have plenty of time."

The young drummer did not believe in wearing himself out unnecessarily.

Red Bill took a seat on a huge stone by the side of Peachblossom, and glanced around him.

"Seems to me thet I'd ought ter know this hyar locality pretty well too," said Bill, after a pause, during which he had been looking around him in all directions. "Jist sit whar you are a minute."

The two were on one of the narrow paths to which the reader has already been introduced several times, with the steep wall on one side and a deep chasm on the other. The place was a dangerous one save to people with cool heads and plenty of courage.

Red Bill walked on a few steps to where the rocks above him jutted from the wall and overhung several feet.

Here he stopped and looked carefully at the rocky wall and at the cedars that grew in a thick bush in the angle made by the overhanging mass.

"Durned ef we hain't struck ther very place," said Red Bill, as he clapped his thigh with something like triumph. "Yer see, we've got out o' ther reglar track an' people don't very often get to this hyar spot; but I've knowed all along ez it wuz somewhar about hyar. 'It's an old stampin' ground o' mine, but I'd lost the bearings ov it, and I ain't been hyar for over a year."

"Well, but what good does that do now? Is it going to help us find Kitten?" asked Peachblossom, as he coolly lighted a cigar and assumed a more comfortable position on his rocky seat.

"Shouldn't wonder," returned Red Bill. "Anyhow, it'll give us a better chance ter look around us ef we can git up ter it."

"Well, drive ahead, Bill. You are the guide now," said Peachblossom carelessly, as he puffed at his cigar and watched his companion's movements.

Red Bill was carefully passing his hands over the face of the cliff as if feeling for something that he knew was concealed there.

"What are you trying to find, Bill? A streak of silver or something?" asked the drummer, with a smile.

"No, I'm er lookin' fer a streak of luck, an'—by Caesar, I've found it," answered Red Bill, triumphantly.

He picked at a certain spot in the wall with the point of his bowie-knife, and revealed a hole cut in the solid rock, which had been filled up with clay to make it look like the rest of the wall.

"D'ye see? We didn't want no strangers ter kim foolin' aroun' our chain, me an' Tom Riper, so we jest kivered up our tracks when we kim away, an' by gum, we kivered 'em up so well thet we never c'd find ther place ourselves arterwards. But I've got it now, sure."

As he spoke Bill measured the length of his knife three times above the hole he had by this time cleared of the clay and found another hole of the same kind, that he likewise picked out with his knife.

"What is the purpose of all this digging, Bill?" asked Peachblossom as he knocked the ashes from his cigar, and resumed his smoking with an air of intense enjoyment.

"I'll soon show yer," was Red Bill's reply, as, having measured another three lengths of his knife, he picked out a third hole.

Each hole was about three inches high and wide, and six deep, and, as Red Bill demonstrated, offered a good, secure foothold.

"This hyar's a ladder—thet's what it is," he said, as he pegged away at his fourth hole.

In the course of half an hour Red Bill had scooped out enough holes to enable him to climb up to the cedars in the angle above the path where Peachblossom still sat on his boulder, smoking comfortably.

"It would be rather unpleasant for you, Bill, if you happened to miss your hold. You would drop a thousand feet or so, and I am afraid would jar yourself to an inconvenient extent," observed the drummer.

"I won't miss my hold," said Red Bill, as he grasped the bushes above him and dragged himself a little higher. "Come on."

"Well, when you explain what you expect to find up there, I shall be pleased to render you any assistance within my power. But as for your invitation to 'come on,' why—"

The drummer did not finish his sentence, for, to his surprise, Red Bill was disappearing into the bush, so that only his rough cowhide boots were visible.

Then they, too, vanished, and, in their stead, Red Bill's face looked out of the firs, as he said:

"It's all right. Climb up, and I'll give you my hand."

Peachblossom threw away his cigar, and, with the agility of a cat crawled up the wall by means of the foot-holes and took Red Bill's proffered hand.

"Up with you!" said Red Bill, as with one pull, he dragged the drummer through the bush and into an opening that had been concealed by the firs.

"Ain't this er dandy place?" said Red Bill, as Peachblossom looked around him and saw that he was in a cave some ten feet square, with one side open save for a blanket fastened across the space. "Look here," continued Bill, pushing the blanket aside. "Here's a front yard an' all, no one kin see yer from anywhar. Ain't it bully?"

The "front yard" was a narrow ledge outside the opening below which the precipice descended to the valley, and was in fact the upper side of the overhanging spur through which Peachblossom had climbed.

"Yes, it's handy for you, I suppose, but how does it help us to find Kitten?" asked Peachblossom. "You didn't suppose you would find her here, did you?"

"No, but thar's a short cut to another part o' the mountains, through hyar, ez I'll show you."

Taking Peachblossom into the cave again, Red Bill pushed up a trap-door in one corner of the

ceiling with a step-ladder that had lain unnoticed along the wall.

"Git up this hyar ladder an' look out," said Red Bill.

Peachblossom obeyed, and then came down with a smile of satisfaction.

"Mighty handy arrangement for men who followed the business of yourself and the late lamented Mr. Riper, I should say," observed the drummer.

Red Bill frowned, but a look at the serene countenance of Peachblossom was sufficient to restrain any expressions of wrath in which he might otherwise have indulged, and he said nothing.

"Well, we may as well go on. I want to find that girl before she goes home, and the day is getting well along," continued Peachblossom.

"All right, but I should ha' liked to stay an' see ez everything is all safe in the ranch," replied Red Bill, as he rather reluctantly ascended the ladder. "Thet thar big chest over in ther corner ought to hev some rather vallyble stuff in it."

"Never mind, Bill. You shall come back here again to-night, and I'll come with you," said Peachblossom smiling. "Maybe there's something in there that will interest me, too."

Red Bill frowned again. He did not quite relish some of the drummer's remarks. But he dared not rebel. The young fellow with the white hands, the neat city-made clothes and the terribly rapid and certain finger on the trigger, had him thoroughly under subjection.

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW PEACHBLOSSOM FOUND KITTEN.

RED BILL was half-way up the ladder, and the drummer was standing at its foot, ready to follow, when both started and bowed their heads in a listening attitude.

Peachblossom had been talking to Red Bill, telling him to be as expeditious as possible, but stopped suddenly when he bent his head to listen.

"What in thunder wuz thet?" asked Red Bill, in a faltering voice.

"What did it sound like?" returned Peachblossom.

"Didn't yer hear it?"

"I thought I heard a knocking."

"You *did* hear er knockin', sure ez ye'r born, an' it don't mean no good," whispered Red Bill, in solemn tones.

He ran hastily down the ladder and the young drummer could see that he was trembling all over.

"Thar it is ag'in!" stammered Bill, as he seized Peachblossom's shoulder in an ecstasy of superstitious terror. "Ain't it awful?"

"Why?"

"Why!" repeating the word as he looked wonderingly into the drummer's face. "You ain't sich er tenderfoot that you ain't never heard of Gus Koehler's ghost, I'm sure. He stays in these mountains ever since he was shot down from his seat on ther coach when ther Winters gang cleaned it out, and he goes tapping and knockin' around hyar allers when ther's mischief brewing, sure ez my name's Bill!"

As he spoke the mysterious knocking, that seemed to be in the very cave itself, increased in rapidity and volume of sound.

Peachblossom stepped over to the wall by the side of the big chest, and with the butt of his revolver tapped on the rocky surface.

"What are yer doin'? We'll hev Gus's ghost comin' right in hyar! Don't do that, for the Lord's sake!" implored Red Bill with an ashy-white face.

Peachblossom did not reply, but kept on tapping at the wall, while a smile of intelligence crept over his handsome features.

He listened intently, as he ceased his tapping. Then, inflating his chest for an effort, he yelled, at the very top of his voice:

"Halo-o-o-o-o-o-o!"

"What are yer—"

"Shut up, Bill," commanded the drummer, putting out his hand warningly toward his companion, while he placed his cheek against the wall and waited for a response to his hail.

None came.

"What in thunder—" commenced Red Bill, curiosity getting somewhat the better of superstition.

"Shut up, I tell you!"

"All right, ef you say so, but if Gus Koehler's ghost comes hyar you are responsible!" said Red Bill, as he shrunk further away from the wall at which the young drummer was listening.

For perhaps ten minutes the two men preserved their respective attitudes. Then Peachblossom took his face from the wall, and said, quietly:

"The knocking has stopped, and there is foul play in it. Bill, Kitten is on the other side of that wall."

"Wha-a-t?"

"You heard what I said."

"I know, but—"

"No buts about it. The girl is there," pointing with his six-shooter at the wall, "and we must get her out."

"Git her out? Wal, if you kin dig a gal out of the solid mountain, all right. But I'd like to know somethin' 'bout this hyar business. I don't believe ez thar's any one thar 'cept the ghost of Gus Koehler, an' by Judas, he kin stay thar, ez far ez I am concerned. I don't want to fool with no dead men, bet yer life!"

"Red Bill, you are a fool!" said Peachblossom, with an impatient and contemptuous shrug of his shoulders. "There is another room at the back of that wall, and—"

A sudden thought struck him, and breaking off the sentence, he sprang at Red Bill's throat, and with one twist of his powerful wrist, had the desperado on his knees.

"Red Bill," he hissed, and there was not a hint of the careless, smiling young drummer in the fierce, relentless face that looked down into that of Red Bill, as he held him with a grasp of steel. "Red Bill, are you playing me false? Yes, I know you are, and, by the Eternal, no man can do that when I have given him his life once!"

Red Bill gasped and gurgled, but could not speak. His assailant's white fingers were tightening around his windpipe.

Then Peachblossom released him, with a half-smile of bitter contempt, and stepped back a pace or two.

Red Bill did not attempt to rise, but he held out his right hand with a supplicating gesture that was too earnest and natural not to be real.

"Peachblossom!" he whispered, for he had been nearly throttled, and had not yet acquired control of his voice. "I sw'ar you're off ef yer think ez I ain't a-doin' the squar' thing."

"You lie!" returned the drummer, fiercely, as he made a gesture as if he would again seize Red Bill's throat.

"No—no, I don't," said Red Bill, eagerly. "I sw'ar that ef thar's any other room 'round hyar, I don't know nothin' 'bout it. I've allers thought ez it wuz solid rock thar, an' ef it ain't, why I'm more surprised than you are."

Peachblossom looked earnestly into the other's face, and then, as if satisfied, said, quietly:

"I believe you. Get up."

Red Bill obeyed sheepishly, and stood awaiting further orders.

It was at this moment that Kitten, in the other cave, cried out that Quaker Hi was killing her, as already narrated.

Then all was silent, Hiram having knocked her senseless and run up the steps.

Red Bill started, and his eyes opened about twice as wide as usual. He had heard Kitten's last wild cry for succor.

"By ther great horn spoon, ther gal is thar!" he said. "But how in nation did she git thar, and whar is she, anyhow?"

Peachblossom did not answer. He was closely examining the wall from top to bottom, tapping it with the butt of his revolver to discover whether it was anything but the solid rock that it seemed to be.

"Bill, are you sure that there is no way of getting behind this wall?" he asked, at length, as he turned around, with a puzzled expression on his handsome features.

"Wal, Peachblossom, ef any one had asked me half an hour ago, I should ha' said, for sure, that thar wuz no place behind the wall to get to, but I'm so mixed up now that I could hardly sw'ar ez my name is Bill, let alone anything else."

"Um! You can take my word for it that there is a space behind the wall, and that Kitten is in it. What I want to know is how to get there," returned Peachblossom, talking more to himself than to his companion. "I want to reach the top of the wall there. You haven't got another ladder, I suppose?"

"No. That one leading to the trap above is fastened in, and I guess it would smash all to pieces if I wuz to try an' move it."

The young drummer's eyes were roving over the apartment during Red Bill's reply, until they rested upon the big chest in the corner.

The very thing! He sprang upon it and hammered at the wall over his head with his revolver.

A shower of dust was the result.

"I've found it, as sure as shooting," said the drummer, delightedly. "Come up here, Bill."

Red Bill obeyed.

"Now take your knife and scoop away at the wall up there as you did below in making the steps to reach this place. You can do that work better than I. Besides," dusting off the shoulders of his black coat, "I don't care about getting that clay on my clothing. It is decidedly offensive."

It was a rule of the drummer's life never to neglect his personal appearance. He always kept his valises well stocked with toilet requisites, such as brushes, clean linen, and so forth, and, as he said, he was able to look respectable wherever he might be. That very morning he had put on clean cuffs and collar, and could have cut as respectable a figure on Broadway as any well-to-do business man in the whole of New York.

Red Bill might have expressed some contempt for such "b'iled shirt ways" if he had not already received plenty of proof that Peachblos-

som was a dude only in dress, and a "terror" when it came to a fight.

He climbed up on the chest without a word, and with his bowie-knife scooped at the wall, as the drummer had directed.

As he worked the clay came out in solid chunks, showing that there was a hole, filled up, to escape observation, with soft earth. How or by whom it was done, neither Red Bill or Peachblossom could tell.

"She's er comin', fast," observed Red Bill, as he succeeded in making a hole, into which he could thrust his hand and arm.

"Hurry up, Bill," was the drummer's only response. "Hurry up!"

"By gosh! It is holler back o' this hyar wall. I've got my hand through, and it don't touch nothin' on the other side!" said Bill, excitedly. "My, if Tom Riper and me had known this hyar, we wouldn't hev felt quite so safe."

"Pull out that clay and spare me your reminiscences," said Peachblossom, sharply. "We have work before us."

"All right, boss. Hyar she goes."

Red Bill applied himself to his task with a will, and soon had a hole big enough for a man's head and shoulders to pass through.

"Let me raise you, and then you look through, and tell me what you see," said Peachblossom, as he hastily removed his coat and white cuffs, and placed them on a rough wooden bench on the other side of the cave. He had already soiled his clothes more than he liked, and he determined to be more careful now.

"Now, up with you, Bill!"

The young drummer, with hardly an effort, put his arms under his burly companion and raised him to his shoulder, so that he could put his head through the hole.

"I can't see er durned thing," said Bill; "but seems to me I kin hear some one breathing kinder hard. Guess it's ther gal."

"Pull out some more clay, and then crawl right through," said Peachblossom, "and if you see that rascally fellow with the tall hat, grab him. I hate hypocrites on general principles, and I am particularly down on a man who adopts the style of an honorable and worthy set to further his own villainous ends."

"You bet I'll grab him. I owe him one for what he said last night," growled Red Bill.

Peachblossom gave him a push to help him through the hole, and helped him so effectually that he went sprawling through, head-first.

"Are you hurt, Bill?" cried Peachblossom.

"Here she is, Peachblossom," was Bill's reply.

"She's a-lyin' here, with all her senses gone, I guess. I can't see her, but her hands are as cold as a corpse. There ain't no one else here, I don't think."

"Pick her up and put her through this hole, if you can. We'll attend to Quaker Hi afterward," said the drummer.

"Peach—" muttered Kitten.

"She's a-comin' to," said Bill. "Get up here, Kitten."

He lifted her to her feet as he spoke, and although she was considerably dazed by the blow she had received, she was able to climb the wall with nearly all her usual agility, with Red Bill's assistance. Peachblossom was leaning through the opening, and as she raised her hands he seized them, and soon pulled her into the other apartment.

"Now, Bill," he said, as he gave his hand to Red Bill and helped him through.

"What about Quaker Hi?" asked Red Bill, as he looked from Peachblossom to Kitten, who had sunk exhausted on the big chest.

"He is in there," said Kitten, faintly. "He tried to kill me."

"Never mind. We will settle with him," said Peachblossom.

A rustle was heard in the other cave, from which Kitten had just escaped.

"There he is," whispered Red Bill. "What shall I do?"

"Do nothing at present," returned Peachblossom, quietly. "We have the advantage of him while he doesn't know of this hole in the wall, and we can easily get at him without giving away that secret."

And while he spoke Quaker Hi, after vainly searching for Kitten had just run up the steps in his wild hunt for the girl who now knew too much for his safety.

CHAPTER XIV.

SOME UNEXPECTED VISITORS.

It was a fearful situation for both Red Bill and Quaker Hi, when the latter seized his captor's throat and forced him back on the narrow pass, as told at the end of the eleventh chapter.

The attack, sudden as it was, did not disconcert Red Bill as much as it would a man not used to the quick reprisals of foes on the borders of civilization. He was always more or less prepared to meet unlooked-for contingencies, and if he had not been guilty of carelessness for an instant Hiram Placid would never have caught him at such a disadvantage.

"Verily the Philistines are upon thee, now, Friend Bill," hissed Hiram, with devilish malignity. "I would that I knew whether 'twere better to slay thee with knife or pistol, or to

cast thee from this mountain and leave thy flesh below to the fowls of the air."

While speaking he had never relaxed the fierce hold on Red Bill's throat that he had secured at the first onslaught.

"Do what yer durned please, you white-livered cur. You ain't got nerve enough to face a man in a fair squar' fight, an' I wouldn't take my life ez er gift from such a man. So go on with yer killin' ef yer like," grunted Bill, as he held Quaker Hi's wrist and thus prevented his choking him to death off-hand.

Quaker Hi did not reply, but, looking straight into the eyes of Red Bill, tried to roll him over the cliff.

The path, it will be remembered, ran along the face of the cliff and ended abruptly at the point where Red Bill ordered Quaker Hi to walk over.

It was an awful place for a struggle.

Below, thousands of feet, huge bowlders, each weighing many hundred tons, looked like pebbles that a child could throw, while shrubs and grass in tufts were mere suggestions on the landscape.

The two men tugged and panted, but the contest was from the first an unequal one. Hiram Placid had Red Bill almost completely in his power.

"You tried to make me step off into the air, didn't you, Bill—er—er—yea, verily! Now, thou seest thou art delivered into my hands, and it shall go grievously with thee before the sun goes down."

"Shut yer canting jaw!" growled Red Bill, surlily, "or I'll throw yer down the gulch while yer a-talkin' about it."

Red Bill did not seem to realize the fearful danger he was in, or else he was so utterly fearless that he did not care.

Hiram did not speak again, but putting forth all the strength that lurked in his sinewy frame, slowly forced Red Bill back until his head overhung the precipice.

"Now, Bill, thine hour has come. Verily, society will owe much to thy servant for thus putting a wicked man out of the way."

Hiram rolled up his eyes in mock piety as he spoke, and grinned in the face of his intended victim.

The action goaded Red Bill into a perfect fury. With an effort of supreme strength, he threw up his feet behind Hiram and tripped him.

Quaker Hi fell forward, and at the same instant Bill rolled over and bore the other downward.

Now commenced the struggle in earnest.

Hiram did not wait to allow Bill to gain perfect control, but, even as he succumbed momentarily, was practicing a trick in wrestling that he had learned long ago. He bent his arm in such a way that his elbow was planted in Bill's chest. The more Bill pulled the deeper went Hiram's elbow into him, and the more difficult it became for him to breathe.

Red Bill saw through this maneuver at once, and he tried with all his strength to break Hiram's hold. But, though a powerful man, Red Bill had but few of the tricks of wrestling which his opponent knew so well how to bring to his aid.

"Thou shouldst rise betimes, Friend Bill, if thou dost expect to overcome thy servant in battle!" hissed Quaker Hi, mockingly.

"Curse you, I'll fix you yet!" howled Red Bill, as he tore himself loose and planted his fist full in the other's eye.

The result was just what was to be expected. Quaker Hi, taken by surprise, removed his elbow, and the two were locked in a close embrace, in which only main strength could count.

They were swaying on the very edge of the fearful chasm.

"We shall die together, anyhow," said Hiram, in his natural tones, without any of the Quaker dialect.

Even in that desperate moment Red Bill looked in astonishment at the man whom he had always believed to be more fool than knave, and to speak with the quaint expressions of the "Society of Friends" because he had been raised among them.

Now he realized that Quaker Hi was, in reality, a different man altogether from the eccentric character that had for months been the butt of the camp.

"If you're ready to die, come on, durn you!" growled Red Bill, as, pressing his feet against the face of the bluff, he went headlong, with Quaker Hi, over the precipice.

Hiram closed his eyes, as even the bravest will, when brought into the actual presence of a violent death.

What thoughts he had, as, with his foe holding him as in a vise, he remained poised for a brief second, on the edge of the bluff, utterly powerless to save himself, who shall say? It is said that, at such times, all the events of the past life, all the acts, good and bad, pass in review before the mental vision. If so, Hiram Placid's thoughts could not have been of an enviable description.

Then came the horrible feeling of being in mid-air—falling, falling!

Hardly had he time to realize that he was fairly over the precipice, when he crashed into a thick, prickly pine, and felt himself dragged by unseen hands upon a solid surface.

He opened his eyes and met the twinkling blue orbs of Peachblossom, while Red Bill sat by his side with a six-shooter in his hand, pointed menacingly at his head.

"Thought you were gone that time, I presume," said Peachblossom lightly. "A very pretty little time you and Bill have been enjoying. I have been watching you."

"Seems to me you might ha' lent me a hand," growled Red Bill. "I s'pose you'd ha' let him kill me ef he could?"

"My estimable friend, William, I should not have allowed him to do anything of the kind, because I cannot spare you just now."

"Thanks!"

"You are quite welcome. But, as I was about to say, I enjoy a good square fight, and when the chances are equal, I do not propose to interfere."

"And s'posin' when we tumbled off there, that there hadn't been this hyar convenient arrangement to catch us, would yer hev let this hyar durned Quaker—who ain't a Quaker, after all—hev shoved me over?"

"I don't know, Bill. The circumstances were different. There was this thing to catch you, and you knew it. Our friend, Mr. Hiram, did not, and he showed more bravery than you, by a great deal," answered Peachblossom, carelessly.

Quaker Hi looked up while the drummer was speaking and saw that a large fir growing out of the rocks above him had been strengthened by a framework of timber, and while affording a safe means of reaching the ledge upon which he sat—and which was what Red Bill had called the "front yard" of his ranch in the mountains—also hid it entirely from the view of any too curious persons who might take the trouble to peer over the edge of the precipice above.

To say that he was astonished would but feebly describe his state of mind. He had entirely given himself up when he went over the cliff, and was quite resigned to his fate. Now that he found himself still alive, however, he was on the alert to take advantage of anything that might occur.

"Mr. Placid, allow me to hand you your hat," said Peachblossom, as with a deep bow, he placed the tall hat, somewhat the worse for its experience of the last few hours, in Quaker Hi's hand.

Hiram took the hat, and after straightening it as well as he could, and thrusting a finger through the hole made by the drummer's bullet the night before, with a regretful sigh, placed it solemnly upon his head.

There was no hint of the desperate man who had so nearly ended Red Bill's life, and who had held Kitten a prisoner, in the oily, shabby-gentleman in the tall hat, who looked so meekly up into Peachblossom's face.

It was Hiram Placid's policy now to be humble and quiet, and, man of the world that he was, he determined not to lose a single point for want of carrying out the proper tone of action.

"Bring him in, Bill," commanded Peachblossom, shortly.

Red Bill, who had been contentedly sitting by the side of his late adversary while Peachblossom brought forth the hat, now arose to his feet, and significantly signing to Hiram with his revolver told him to get up also.

Hiram obeyed mechanically. He was wondering how Peachblossom had secured the tall hat, which had dropped from his head early in the struggle with Red Bill, and had gone bowling over the bluff, as he supposed, never to be found again. He had just correctly surmised that it had come by the same road that he and Bill had followed, when, as the blanket that hid the entrance to the cave was pulled aside, he found himself face to face with Kitten.

The girl had entirely recovered from the effects of her imprisonment, and though she still bore the marks of Quaker Hi's brutal fist, was as lively and impudent as usual.

She was sitting on the big chest, swinging her feet carelessly backward and forward, and kicking her heels against it with right goodwill.

Quaker Hi started involuntarily when he saw the young girl.

"How are you, Hiram?" she asked, with a mischievous smile playing around her lips. "Sorry I had to leave you without saying 'Good-by,' especially after you had treated me so handsomely. I should like to board at your house always, if we could arrange it. The Hiram Hotel! Sounds well, doesn't it? It is better than the Slippery Elm Hotel for accommodations, even if the stage doesn't pass the door."

As Kitten rattled on, Hiram Placid eyed her in a furtive manner that said plainly enough how he would like to have shaken her into silence had he dared.

"Sit down, Mr. Placid," put in the young drummer, "while we try to settle upon the next thing to be done. Bill," turning to Red Bill, "where is that rope you use for fishing?"

"I'll get it."

"Hurry up."

"All right."

Red Bill ran up the ladder to the trap that has already been referred to, and by means of which in fact, he had been able to catch Quaker Hi so neatly with his noose. In a few minutes he returned with the identical rope, which was some thirty feet long.

"Close the trap, Bill," said Peachblossom, briskly, as he took the rope in his hand and examined it carefully.

"I have. I allers do, an' I don't think there's a man in Colorado smart enough to find it from ther outside when I shut it down."

"Now, Mr. Placid," said Peachblossom, turning to Hiram, "I have a proposition to make to you."

Quaker Hi bowed his head, but said nothing.

"You have been caught in several transactions of a questionable nature, one of them being the unlawful imprisonment of this young girl, and it is extremely probable that if the boys down in Slippery Elm learn of that business that you may be in danger of the rather violent exercise that you recommended to Red Bill only last night."

As he spoke, Peachblossom made a significant motion that showed he referred to hanging, and Red Bill chuckled.

"What is thy proposition?" asked Quaker Hi, quietly.

"To get out of Slippery Elm forthwith," said the drummer.

"And never to show your ugly face here again," added Kitten, swinging her feet harder than ever.

"And if I refuse—"

"You will not refuse," said Peachblossom.

"Thou art right. Thy judgment is mellow, though thou art but a stripling," returned Quaker Hi; adding below his breath: "Curse you! It's your turn now, but look out for me when I get on top again."

"Of course I am right. In my line of business I have to be right, or I should not remain long in the employ of Valens & Schwab, wholesale lace merchants, of Chicago."

"How am I going to get out of this place?" asked Hiram Placid, dropping his Quaker dialect, as if he realized that he could no longer deceive the three persons in whose presence he stood. "You don't expect me to go the way that I came, I suppose?"

"If I had ther say-so, I'd jist chuck yer down the gulch," put in Red Bill, incidentally.

"No, Mr. Placid, I will explain," said the drummer. "We will make a noose in this rope, slip it over your head and catch you under the arms. It may not be very comfortable for you, but you must excuse that. Then we will let you down from the 'front yard,' about twenty-five feet. You will strike a mule-path about that distance below, where you can take the rope off and make the best of your way to—Chicago."

At the mention of this city Hiram Placid looked quickly into Peachblossom's face, but the drummer looked so entirely unconscious that the former felt sure the allusion to his former home had no sinister meaning.

Red Bill, who had been busy in making the slip-knot in the rope, now approached Quaker Hi, to throw the noose over his head, when a sudden noise made everybody look over to the ladder in the corner, as with a great scraping and unlimited profanity, Nat Grute and his hopeful son, Pudge, came tumbling down into the apartment.

CHAPTER XV.

A GOOD JUDGE OF WHISKY.

As Grute and his son made their unceremonious entrance, Quaker Hi, always on the alert, looked quickly around for some means of escape.

Kitten had jumped from the big chest at sight of her father and brother, and ran toward them. Bad as they were, she was glad to see them.

This was Quaker Hi's opportunity. The hole in the wall, communicating with his own cave, had not escaped him, and with one bound he was upon the chest and crawling through the hole.

The next minute he was lying, bruised, scratched and breathless, on the floor in the dark, in just about the spot where he had knocked Kitten senseless. Then he picked himself up, and running up the stairs to the main apartment of his hiding-place, shut and bolted a heavy door at the head of the stairs that he never used save in cases of emergency.

"So, Peachblossom, you will dictate to Hiram Placid, will you?" he hissed, as he dropped into his seat before the escritoire and struck it with his clinched fist. "Hiram Placid! Bah! Leonard Bolton is my name, and I will make this duds drummer, or detective, or whatever he is, remember it before he gets back to Chicago. He has stepped in between me and my plans, and I do not allow any man to do that."

He lighted a wax-candle that stood in a quaint brass candlestick on his desk, and then, opening a secret drawer, took therefrom a picture and an old, yellow letter, the folds of which had almost worn through with age.

"Here they are! If I had only found an opportunity to compare this picture with her. I am afraid to carry it about with me in case of accidents, and yet— Who knows? Perhaps I might want it at any time. Yes, I'll keep it in my clothes, with the letter. I dare say I can defend it, if needs be."

He opened his shirt, and drawing forth a small flat leather bag that was hung by a cord around his neck, and that generally reposed snugly under his left arm, opened it with a brass key also slung on the cord and deposited in it the letter.

He was about to put the picture in with it, when, apparently obeying a sudden impulse, he drew himself closer to the candle on the desk and held the picture close to it.

As the sickly glare of the candle fell full upon his face, every line of craft and cunning, every wrinkle of villainy on his sleek, hypocritical face, was brought prominently into view. A devilish grin lurked in the corners of his mouth, and seemed to be sneering at the frown which bent his eyebrows low down over his twinkling gray eyes, deep-set on each side of his hooked nose.

Leonard Bolton—or Quaker Hi, whichever you please to call him—did not include personal good looks among his qualifications.

He held the portrait close to the flame of the candle and examined it minutely.

"Yes, it is she, undoubtedly. This is but a babe of four years, but the features are the same. There is the same curve in the lips, the same pert nose, the same sweep of the eyebrows. Leonard Bolton, you had the game in your own hands when that drummer fellow—curse him—stepped in your way."

With a scowl of demoniacal malignity he turned his head and looked down the apartment toward the door, which he had just fastened after him, and on the other side of which, for all that he knew, Peachblossom and Red Bill might soon be thundering, in an attempt to get at him.

"Now, what am I to do next? That girl must be got into my power again somehow. I've given myself away, and I'm afraid the Quaker racket won't work any longer. That will make it a little harder for me. But—pshaw—I never failed in anything I attempted yet, and I know I shall get through this all right. Yea, verily!"

He said the last two words mockingly—as if mimicking his own manner of uttering them.

Again he held the picture close to the candle and examined it critically.

"Yes, the same, surely. Any one could see by this baby portrait that she would become a pretty girl in time. So she is. What a fool she is anyhow not to listen to me. Why as my wife in Chicago, she could have everything that girls care for. She should be dressed as well as any one in the city. She should have a splendid home, horses, carriages, diamonds! Ah! What a fool! What a fool!"

He sighed as he muttered this. Then he went on, musingly, as he turned the photograph over and over in his long, bony fingers.

"Of course the expense would come out of her own estate. Still, that would be all the better, because then, if she knew it, she would feel more independent, while, if she didn't know it, I should, which would make me feel comfortable. So it is better all around."

A hoarse chuckle came up from his throat at this thought, and he hit his teeth with the photograph two or three times in his enjoyment of the conceit.

"By Jupiter, but I'm too good-natured. If I did not take such an interest in the girl she would never hear anything about her grandfather's will, but would go on in the wild life in the mountains which is all she remembers. Leonard Bolton, you're too good-hearted, and it will be your ruin yet."

His chuckle became an absolute burst of laughter, and he was so amused that he forgot for the moment about the failure of his attempt to retain possession of the girl.

His chuckle gradually died away as his brain went to work to formulate a plan for again getting hold of Kitten. His brows knitted and his hand, holding the photograph, dropped upon the desk before him, as he thought, and thought, and thought.

So absorbed was he in his scheming that he never once turned his head to look around him.

Had he done so, he would have seen something unusual in the cave.

At the end in which was the narrow entrance through which he and Kitten had come in first, he would have seen a faint streak of daylight.

At first the light was nearly imperceptible, but it grew plainer and plainer, as if the door were being slowly opened from the outside. Then the light disappeared almost entirely, and the outlines of a man could be just distinguished crawling through the narrow opening.

Still Hiram Placid sat, unconscious of intrusion, thinking, thinking.

The man coming into the cave evidently did not wish to attract attention. He came through the narrow portal, and then, as soon as he found room, stood upright, watching Hiram from a shadowy corner.

The stranger's hands were empty, but his six-

shooter was handy in his belt, and as he drew himself up, he felt the butt of it to make sure that he could draw in a hurry if need be.

He looked at Hiram for fully half a minute before making another movement.

He evidently could not tell exactly who was sitting at the desk with his head bowed down and a photograph in his hand, for he kept on turning and twisting himself slightly as if to get a better view of the face of Hiram.

The light of the candle, dim at best, fell upon Quaker Hi's head as he sat, leaving his face in shadow.

He was in a deep study, and had not the remotest idea that he was not alone in his den.

The stranger, finding that he could not distinguish the features of the man in the chair from where he stood, cautiously came forward, step by step, until he was right behind and bending over Hiram Placid.

Gently he leaned forward over the other's head, trying to see who it was.

Perhaps he might have succeeded in doing so without disturbing Hiram, had he not, at the critical moment when he was leaning right over the latter's head, have lost his balance and fallen heavily forward, with both hands on Hiram's shoulders.

Like a flash Quaker Hi was on his feet, holding the muzzle of his revolver within an inch of his visitor's face.

He did not fire, however. He had the "drop," and could afford to see who had intruded upon him before he pulled trigger.

The man whose awkwardness had placed him in such a dangerous dilemma, stood with both hands up looking into the other's face as well as he could in the gloom.

Then Hiram Placid picked up the candle with his left hand, holding the pistol in his right, ready for business, and passed the light before the face of the stranger.

As he did so, the two recognized each other at the same moment.

"Quaker Hi, by gum!"

"Dan Walker!"

"Who'd ha' thought o' findin' you hyar?"

"Verily, Dan, I am even surprised at thy presence," returned Quaker Hi, meekly, as he replaced his pistol in his belt.

"Wal, ef you ain't the strangest critter!" observed Dan Walker. "Durn my picture, ef I ever knew whar yer claim was er sittivated afore. Feed me on coyote-skins ef I did."

"Verily, thy servant had to seek refuge on the mountain, where the birds of the air—"

"Oh, give us a rest on thet thar talk, Quaker Hi," interrupted Dan Walker, impatiently.

"Can't yer git more light into this hyar crib o' yourn? I want ter talk ter yer, and when I talk to er man, I like ter see his face."

"Verily, Friend Dan, I will do as thou desirest," replied Hiram, as he pulled a rope and let in a flood of daylight through one of the openings above, described previously.

"Wal, ef this don't beat creation," said Dan, as he looked around the cave wonderingly.

"Ter think o' me dropping onter yer in this hyar way! Say, how long ha' yer had this ranch, Hi?"

Without waiting for an answer, Dan marched over to the recess, where his eye had caught the bottles that gave promise of something stronger than water.

"Hiram, I'm as dry as smoke, an' my throat feels like a gulch in a tornado—full o' dust an' prickly heat."

"Verily, friend Walker, thy case is piteous. Yes, it is, by my troth!" said Hiram, getting somewhat mixed in his dialect in his nervousness.

"What's in them bottles, Hi?"

"Which bottles?"

"Why, these hyar."

"Nothing but a soothing cordial, friend Dah, that thy servant hath recourse to when he feels sick and sore in spirit," returned Quaker Hi, with a sly smile that was not lost on his companion.

"Sick and sore, eh? Wal, thet fits my case ezactly, Hi," said Dan, with a grin, as he took down a square black bottle, uncorked it and put it to his lips.

He kept the bottle to his mouth so long that Hiram began to wonder whether he would ever remove it, and rolled his eyes in a way that told of an ecstasy of enjoyment.

At last he took it away, and holding it in his hand, shook his head at Hiram, and said:

"Hiram, whar did yer get it?"

"Why? Dost thee not like it?" asked Hiram, quietly.

"Like it!"

Dan Walker could not say any more. He put the black bottle to his mouth again, and kept it there longer than the first time.

"Hiram?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what's in this hyar bottle?"

"Yea, verily, I do."

"What is it?"

"It is a sinful beverage called whisky, if thy servant mistakes not."

Dan took another pull at the black bottle.

"Hiram."

"Yes."

"You—(hic!)—you—are—(hic!)—mistaken."

"Mistaken?"

Another long drink by Dan.

"Yes—(hic!)—thash whasher said—mis—mis—(hic!)—mistaken!"

Hiram looked at Dan in surprise, and that worthy employed the time in again interviewing the bottle—the movement of his throat showing that he was literally pouring the fiery liquor into his interior.

"I do not think I mistake, friend Dan. Verily, I could have sworn that the bottle contained whisky of a goodly strength and savor," said Quaker Hi.

Dan Walker, holding the bottle close to his mouth, looked at the other with drunken gravity. Then he drank again.

"Hi—Quaker Hi—as (hic!)—the boys call yer (hic!) You're a slick 'un." (Another drink). "A slick 'un, I tell yer," in a louder tone, and looking more grave than ever. "But—(hic!)—you can't fool old Dan Walker! Not by a—(hic!)—durned sight. (Hic!) I drank whisky afore you wuz born, d'ye—(hic!)—hear me, an' I know what whisky is! Whoop! An' I'm (hic!) a murderer!"

Quaker Hi looked a little serious at this last declaration, and prepared himself to draw his weapon in case Dan got too obstreperous. Then he saw that it was only the exuberance of whisky, and he yawned as Dan Walker went on:

"Yes, I claim to be—(hic!)—a judge of whisky, an' I—(hic!)—tell yer thet's not—(hic!)—whisky in thet thar—(hic!)—bottle."

"What is it then? Verily, thou speakest in parables!" said Hiram.

Another long pull at the square black bottle, an attempt to wink knowingly with his now very sleepy eyes, and Dan whispered, as if he were telling an important secret:

"It's—(hic!)—liquid gold and fresh—(hic!)—cream—that's what it is."

"Well, thee'd better sit down on that cot," said Quaker Hi, gently taking Dan by the arm.

"Whash thatsh? Me sit—(hic!)—down, Quaker Hi! Why—(hic!)—I'm a—(hic!)—shooter from the—(hic!)—devil's canyon, an' I'll—(hic!)—blow everybody to—(hic!)—blazes!"

He drew his six-shooter with his right hand, still holding the bottle in his left, and after taking one more deep draught, which emptied it, dashed the bottle to fragments on the floor, and then in quick succession fired two shots from his revolver into the air through the open trap-door over his head.

"Whoop! Lemme—(hic!)—fight. I—(hic!)—drink blood an'—(hic!)—smoke gunpowder! Whoop!"

"Fool! He'll give me away with his crazy drunken idiocy!" hissed Quaker Hi, as he dragged the pistol out of the hand of the now helplessly intoxicated miner, and threw him to the floor, where he almost immediately fell asleep, as he feebly muttered that he was a murderer and could lick all Colorado.

At the same moment a tremendous banging at the door shutting off the stairway up which Hiram had run in escaping from Peachblossom and Red Bill, told him that the latter had discovered his retreat and were hot upon his track.

CHAPTER XVI.

A WICKED BLOW IN THE DARK.

"DURN thet thar long-legged wolf, he's got away after all," ejaculated Red Bill, in a disgusted tone, as Quaker Hi's heels disappeared through the opening into the other cave.

Even as he spoke, Peachblossom's six-shooter cracked, and a bullet plowed through the beel of Hiram's boot, making a small furrow, that did not do any particular damage, however.

"The fellow was just a trifle too far through the hole," said the young drummer, coolly, "or I would have made our sanctimonious friend a little lame."

"Whar in thunderation hev you been?" demanded Nat Grute, as he made a dive at Kitten.

Peachblossom stepped in front of the girl and kept her father away from her, thus defeating his amiable purpose to take her by the shoulders and give her a rough shaking.

"Say!" yelled Nat Grute, savagely, as he found himself face to face with the drummer.

"Well, Mr. Grute," responded Peachblossom, sweetly.

"See hyar, I don't wan't no Eastern dudes a-interfering 'tween me and my gal, and, by the great horn spoon, I won't hev it," spluttered Nat Grute, worked up into a perfect frenzy by Peachblossom's nonchalant manner.

"You won't? Well, that is a pity, because I consider this young lady under my protection, and I do not allow anybody to annoy her," said the drummer, as he turned away from the other and looked toward the hole by means of which Hiram had escaped.

As he turned Nat Grute's hand flew to his belt and grasped his bowie.

Quick as a flash, Peachblossom swung around on his heel and faced him, with the muzzle of a pistol only a few inches from the eyes of the landlord of the Slippery Elm Hotel.

"Don't do it, Nat. It won't pay you. Kitten will go home with you, I suppose. But I do

not intend to let you ill-treat her, if I know it. She fell into the hands of this man, Quaker Hi, as you call him, and we have been lucky enough to get her away from him. Very well, then. The best thing you can do is to help me catch him and find out what scheme he is trying to work. I was just going to kick him out of the country when you came tumbling down that ladder. Now, I guess I'll put him through a little examination before I let him go."

"Allers purvided you catches him, in course," put in Red Bill, sententiously.

"I shall catch him," was Peachblossom's reply, uttered with the simplicity of conviction.

"I dunno 'bout thet. Quaker Hi is a pretty slick citizen," said Red Bill. "Howsomever, I'm with yer ter try it."

"And I," said Kitten, clinching her little brown fist.

"And you, Nat?" asked Peachblossom, replacing his revolver in his belt and looking inquiringly at Grute.

"O' course, dad! You're in fer fun of any kind, an' it would be a splendid thing to bang old Hiram. I'd jest like to give one pull at a rope with him a-danglin' on ther end," said Pudge, who had been a close and attentive listener to the conversation of the others.

"Oh, I suppose I mought as well!" growled Grute. Adding, aside: "But I'll git even with you yet, young Mr. Buttermilk, as sure as my name is Nat Grute!"

"Meaning me, I presume," observed Peachblossom, cheerfully.

"You heerd what I said, then?" asked Grute, with a confused air.

"Yes; but don't let that disturb you, Mr. Grute. I know your feelings toward me, even if you do not speak, and I am prepared. So go on with your getting even whenever you are disposed to do so," said the young drummer, with his pleasant smile, that so few could fathom.

Nat Grute did not venture even to mutter again, but he thought that Peachblossom had the sharpest ears he had ever heard of in his life.

"Bill?" said Peachblossom.

"Wal, hyar I am."

"Put yourself through that hole."

Red Bill hesitated.

"Which hole?"

"The hole near the ceiling there. I want you to follow Hiram."

"Wal, but, 'Squire, how am I to git through? Thet thar hole is durned small, an' I'll hev to go in head-first, and wriggle through like a snake."

"Well?"

"Wal, an' what's ter pervent Quaker Hi a-blazin' away at me ez soon ez I look through, an' when my arms is held down ter my sides so thet I can't use my gun? By gum! I think ther best way'll be to let this yer' kid, Pudge, go through. He's small, an' he kin git through all ter wunst, 'thout any danger."

As Red Bill thus delivered himself, he put his hand on Pudge's shoulder and pushed him forward nervously.

"Bill, I want you to do as I tell you," said Peachblossom, quietly. "There is no danger of Hiram's shooting at you. He is not taking any chances, and if he were to stand there and rub you out, he knows he would never get out of that cave alive. I would kill him if I had to tear up the mountain to do it!"

Peachblossom clinched his teeth as he spoke, and the cloud that crossed his ordinarily placid brow showed he was terribly in earnest.

"Wal, 'Squire, I'm glad yer take so much interest in me," observed Red Bill, very much flattered. "An' I'll git through ther hole right away."

Suiting the action to the word, Bill sprung upon the big chest, pulled himself through the hole, and after a great deal of kicking with his heavy boots, disappeared through the opening.

"You must think er great deal of that dirty thief, Red Bill," sneered Nat Grute, "ter talk about pulling down a mountain to kill ther man ez hurts him."

"I would kill him, not to avenge Red Bill, but to teach him that when Peachblossom employs a man to do anything, that man will never be deserted by me, either in life or death. That's all. Get through that hole, Nat Grute, and you, too, Pudge."

"An' what about you?" asked Nat Grute, bending his ugly brows.

"I'll follow you," said the drummer.

"And what about me?" put in Kitten.

"Stay where you are. You will be safe here," replied Peachblossom. "Here, take this. Hide it in your pocket, but be ready to use it in case of emergency."

He gave the girl one of his own pistols, which she took with a grateful smile and nod, and placed in her pocket.

The next instant he had followed Nat Grute and Pudge through the hole into the adjoining cave.

When Peachblossom had let himself down into the other cave he found himself in pitchy darkness save for the feeble glimmer that came through the opening high up in the wall.

"Where are you, Bill?" he whispered.

"Hyar I am," said Red Bill's voice, just behind him.

"Have you a match?"

"Yes."

"Then light it."

Red Bill did as he was told and disclosed himself, Nat Grute and Pudge all together in a corner furthest removed from the steps, and each one with a pistol in his hand.

"Hold the light up high, so that we can see all around," ordered Peachblossom.

"All right."

"No one here," exclaimed the drummer.

"Except four gol-durned fools," growled Red Bill, under his breath.

"Strike another match, Bill."

Red Bill did so.

"Stairs over in the corner," commented Peachblossom.

"Sure as ye'r born," added Pudge, as he ran over to them and crawled up toward the door closed and fastened at the top.

The second match went out, just as Pudge banged at the door with the butt of his revolver.

Red Bill did not wait to be told to light a third match, but did so at once.

"There is a big piece of rock lying under the stairs there. The next thing to be done is to pick it up and try and burst the door open with it. Quaker Hi is on the other side of that door, and we can't get at him until the door is open," said Peachblossom, looking around him by the doubtful glimmer of the match.

Nat Grute went to the stone and tried to lift it. It was too heavy for him, and Peachblossom went over to help him.

"Come hyar, yer young devil-skin," growled Nat Grute to his hopeful son, "an' help us with this stone."

The three men lugged the stone to the top of the stairs, and just as Red Bill's last match went out, and left the cave in darkness, the big stone was thundering at the door with a force that made it rattle, but did not start it from its hinges or lock in the slightest degree.

"Another one," said Peachblossom, and again the stone was banged against the stout, iron-barred door.

Red Bill was holding the end of the burnt match in his fingers blowing its red embers to relieve ever so little the darkness. The operation showed his rugged features, so that they looked in the dull, red gleam like those of a mountain demon escaped for a brief moment from his secret abode at the base of the great rocks.

There was no reasonable doubt in the mind of Peachblossom that Quaker Hi was on the other side of the door—as indeed the reader knows he was—and he was determined to get at him somehow. It was, accordingly, with renewed energy that he swung one end of the huge stone—Pudge and Nat Grute holding the other—so that it made a crackling noise on its contact with the door, that proclaimed an unmistakable split in the solid wood.

At the same instant a yell from Red Bill resounded above the crashing of the stone against the door, and a peal of mocking laughter, in the tones of Quaker Hi, kept it company.

"Oh!" groaned Red Bill. "The long-faced, white-livered scoundrel has broke my skull."

Peachblossom composedly felt in his pocket for a match, lighted it and looked down the stairs toward the spot on which Red Bill had been standing, and where his pitiful groaning was still continuing in a dismal monotone.

Lying stretched on the damp ground, was the redoubtable Bill, with an ugly cut over his right eye, from which the blood poured, detracting still more from what was never, at any time, a very handsome countenance.

"What is the matter, Bill?" asked Peachblossom, running down the stairs and bending over Red Bill, the lighted match still in his hand.

Red Bill was about to reply, when suddenly a heavy iron bar, with a hook at the end, descended from the roof, and striking Peachblossom on the back of the head, stretched him senseless by the side of his companion.

CHAPTER XVII.

FOUR AGAINST ONE.

"WHAT in thunderation is that?" growled Nat Grute, as the place became again enveloped in darkness, and he heard the sound of Peachblossom's fall.

Red Bill had fainted from loss of blood just as the young drummer had fallen, and was lying utterly oblivious of all that was passing around him.

Nat and Pudge were still balancing the heavy stone on the top step, where Peachblossom had left it when he ran down to Red Bill's assistance.

"How should I know what it is?" said Pudge, replying to his father's question. "Sounds as if them other galoots have got laid out. Hallo! Peachblossom!" he roared. "Peachblossom! Bill!"

But there was no answer, and father and son felt a superstitious shiver run through them at the solemn stillness of the gloomy cave.

"Pudge, drop this hyar stone, and let's go

back. I don't care nothing 'bout Quaker Hi. He hasn't never done nothin' to me, an' I don't want to go chasing him all over the country just to please that there drummer."

Even as he spoke, there was a cracking in the door, and a flood of light suddenly streamed in the faces of Nat and Pudge, almost blinding them momentarily.

Both started involuntarily, and the heavy stone that they had been using as a battering-ram went rattling and clattering down the stairs with a noise sufficient to awaken the Seven Sleepers.

As they rubbed their eyes and tried to discern the nature of the light that had so unexpectedly burst upon them, the drawling tones of Quaker Hi burst upon their ears:

"Verily, this is an unseemly din to make at the threshold of a man of peace, who desires but to dwell in his tent in quietude. Yea, verily."

"What the—" commenced Nat Grute, with a spluttering attempt to be brave and unconcerned.

"Silence, friend Grute. Come hither and rest thyself. Thou art wearied, methinks," interrupted Hiram, in his drawling way.

At the same time he seized Nat Grute and Pudge by the backs of their necks and dragged them into the upper room with a violence ludicrously at variance with the humble tones.

Vainly did the father and son struggle to get away. Quaker Hi's long sinewy fingers and powerful wrist were too much for them. He held them as in a vise. Then he kicked the door shut, it fastening with a spring, and thrust them away from him with a sudden movement that sent them staggering half-way down the long room.

The window openings, or top-doors, in the roof, were still open, and the place was very light.

It was the sudden opening of the door by Hiram that had so dazzled and confused the landlord of the Slippery Elm Hotel and his son.

"Whasher mazzer?" grunted a sleepy voice, and Nat Grute saw with surprise that Dan Walker was lying on the floor, evidently drunk, and already fast asleep, after making his feeble inquiry.

"Thee seems surprised, friend Grute," grinned Quaker Hi.

"Maybe," was Nat Grute's brief response.

"Well, now, friend Grute, perhaps thee will tell me why thou wert knocking so boisterously at my door. Is there anything that thy servant can do for thee or thine?"

"What did yer kidnap my—my daughter for?" blustered Nat Grute, trying to conceal the fact that he was badly frightened.

"Meaning sister Kitten, I presume?"

"She ain't no sister o' yours, Quaker Hi," suddenly interrupted Pudge, "an' I don't want yer to say so. Call her Kitten, if yer want to, but leave out the 'sister'."

Quaker Hi ground his teeth, and a greenish glare shot from his little shifty eyes that boded no good for Pudge. But there was no hint of resentment in the soft tones with which he said:

"Verily, friend Pudge, 'twas but a form of speech, meaning no lack of respect for the young lady."

"Wheresh young—(hic!)—lady? Trot her—(hic!) out. Dan Walker will—(hic!)—purfect 'er young—(hic!)—lady every—(hic!)—time!"

Dan Walker was in that peculiar alcoholic condition in which the subject receives on his brain the impression of a word spoken here and there, while remaining utterly oblivious to the general purport of the conversation.

"Now, Nat Grute, what do you want here? That's the question."

Grute looked quickly into Hiram Placid's face. The tones in which the latter had last spoken were not those of Quaker Hi.

"I don't know that we want anything," said Grute. "Peachblossom an' that thar ranch thief, Red Bill, made me and Pudge come after yer when yer jumped through that hole. Then, when we got in ther dark down thar, and was 'a' poundin' at ther door they went back on us, and I heerd a noise ez if some on 'em wuz hurt. Then you bu'sted ther door open yourself, an' that's all I know about it."

Quaker Hi grinned knowingly as Nat Grute told his story, especially when he referred to the hurts sustained by Red Bill and Peachblossom. Then a frown gathered on his brow, as he looked around him and appeared to be trying to make up his mind on some subject.

Nat Grute watched him narrowly, while Pudge who had thrown himself carelessly upon a settee, seemed to be waiting for anything that might turn up, without caring particularly what it might be.

"Nat," said Hiram Placid, at last.

"Wal?"

"Come over here."

Nat Grute hesitated, and his manner showed so plainly why he did so, that Quaker Hi raised his empty hands above his head, with a contemptuous laugh, as he said:

"Be not afraid, friend Grute. There is no thought of guile in my bosom. I but desire to whisper in thine ear."

Still doubtfully, Nat Grute walked slowly for-

ward with Pudge watching Hiram Placid curiously, but nonchalantly.

Hiram placed his hand on Grute's shoulder and uttered a few words in a low tone in the latter's ear.

"What's that?" howled Nat Grute, starting back, and drawing a six-shooter. "He does, does he? He wants to steal my daughter, does he? Wants to take her ter Chicago, eh? An' that's what he's sneakin' around Slippery Elm for, is it? Whar is he? Durn his plecter, I'll shoot his durned head off, right now!"

Nat Grute rushed toward the door, but Quaker Hi putting his hand on the infuriated ruffian's shoulder, held him back.

"Go slow, friend Nat. Verily 'tis not well for thee to thus excite thyself. We must not slay him, lest peradventure we get ourselves into trouble. Leave it to me."

"Thash all right—(hic!)—Leave it—(hic!) ter me. I'm—(hic!)—er murderer from the (hic!) devil's gulch!" murmured Dan Walker, without opening his eyes.

Nat Grute stepped over to Dan Walker, and administered a hearty kick.

"Hallo, Dan," he growled.

"Wha' shay?" grunted Dan.

"Let him alone," commanded Hiram, sternly. "When we want him it will be time enough to wake him up. Listen to me. I have something to say to you, Nat."

Grute again looked surprised at the manner of Quaker Hi's speech—so different to his usual affected whine.

"What d'ye want ter say? Whatever it is you'd better rattle it off quick. This ain't no time ter be fooling," said Nat.

"Thou'rt right, friend Grute. Sit thee down and tell thy son to go to the other end of the room. This is for thy private ear alone," said Quaker Hi, insinuatingly.

"Pudge! Git!" briefly commanded Nat Grute, pointing to the end of the cave where the narrow, low entry looked like the mouth of some gigantic monster from the other world.

Pudge arose from his seat with a very discontented expression on his features and strolled out of earshot.

"Now, Nat Grute," commenced Quaker Hi, in quick, nervous tones, "I want to talk to you about a job you did in Chicago some years ago."

Nat Grute started back and his hands flew to his pistol-belt, as with his bloodshot eyes distended and a blue tinge overspreading his cheeks, he hoarsely muttered:

"What job?"

Hiram smiled contemptuously as he said, pointing to Grute's trembling hand:

"Don't try to pull on me. I have the drop on you, though you may not think it. Take your hand from your belt."

The cool self-possession of Quaker Hi told on the rough nature of Nat Grute, and he moved his hand away from the butt of his revolver involuntarily.

As he did so, Quaker Hi, with a lightning movement drew his own pistol and pointed it at the other's head.

"I told thee, friend Grute, that I had the drop on thee," he drawled with a smile.

"I'm a durned fool!" observed Nat Grute, in disgusted tones. "You jest bluffed me."

"Thee can call it that if thee pleases. But thee will observe that any treachery on thy part will be to thine own discomfort. Now that I have thee decently covered with my blunderbuss we can resume our conference."

Nat Grute folded his arms and scowled as Hiram continued:

"That's right, friend Grute, keep thine arms folded. Thee asked me what job. I mean the theft of certain money and papers from the bedroom of one Leonard Bolton, at the Palmer House."

Nat Grute's scowl became lower than ever as he hissed:

"You lie!"

"I do not lie, friend Grute, nor do I think it were well for thee to repeat that ugly word. Thee *did* rob Leonard Bolton and thee got money and papers."

Grute moved impatiently, and his lips parted as if he were about to speak.

"Don't say again that I lie, friend Grute, or I will slay thee where thou stand'st," drawled Hiram. "Come, wilt thou not confess that thou didst take the property?"

There was an evident struggle in the mind of Nat Grute, and then he blurted out:

"Well, an' ef I did, what is that to you? They warn't your money and papers, I s'pose."

"Nay, of course not. My name is Hiram Placid. But, friend Grute, there is a certain paper among those thee took from Leonard Bolton's room that I am willing to pay thee for handsomely."

"Which is it?"

"Nay, I cannot tell thee that. But if thou wilt let me see all that thou hast, I perhaps can pick it out."

"What is the paper about?"

"Oh, it is a copy of a letter that Leonard Bolton wrote on parchment for his own amusement. He was fond of making fancy letters and then writing a lot of stuff in a round hand like

lawyers use. Leonard Bolton and I were fast friends, and now that he is dead—"

"Oh, he's dead, is he?" interrupted Nat Grute suspiciously.

"Yes, and I have not a single line of his writing left in my possession. All my little belongings were destroyed by fire a few months ago. Leonard and I were like brothers and I would pay a good sum to get anything in his writing," whined Hiram.

"Wal, that's all right, as far as it goes. I did not rob no hotel, an' I never was in Chicago more'n a few hours in my life. But I have some papers that was left in my hotel by a Eastern man ez skipped without payin' his board, and maybe this hyar letter's among them," said Nat Grute, slowly. "But I can't read, an' I don't know nothin' about 'em myself."

"Very well, then, friend Nat. I will call at Slippery Elm to-night and we will look through the papers together. Then, if I feel like buying any of them, thee and I can agree upon the price," said Quaker Hi, as he restored his pistol to his belt and beckoned to Pudge to come over toward him.

Pudge was a great deal closer to them than Quaker Hi expected. If he had not been so much occupied with the father, he might have seen that the son had hung close enough during the foregoing interview to catch every word of it.

"Say, dad, what 'bout Peachblossom?" asked Pudge, carelessly.

"What's that?" suddenly hiccupped Dan Walker, the name having broken in upon his drunken slumbers. "Peachblossom?—Whar is he? (hic!) W—Whar is he?"

"I think we can fix Mr. Peachblossom," said Hiram, significantly. "You're with me on that, friend Nat, I suppose, eh?"

"Curse him! Yes!" returned Grute, vindictively.

Quaker Hi pulled at an iron ring in the floor ingeniously covered with a heap of the dust that lay thick everywhere, and disclosed a trap about a foot square. The mystery of the blows received by Red Bill and Peachblossom was at once explained when Hiram seized a long iron bar and thrust it down the hole.

"Good scheme!" said Nat Grute, approvingly.

"Bully," added Pudge.

"Wha' yer (hic!) doin'?" interposed Dan Walker's drunken voice, as the big miner stumbled to his feet and peered into the trap, down which Quaker Hi was vigorously poking the iron bar.

"Verily, he should be within reach of my weapon, for I smote him so desperately before that he should still be unconscious," observed Hiram. "And yet the bar does not seem to touch anything save the rocky floor."

"I believe that Peachblossom has a dozen lives, anyhow, dad. You can't knock him out with a crack on the skull," suggested Pudge.

"If you could only see down that hole," said Grute, "you might know what's er goin' on. If thet thar drummer is able ter be around it ain't safe ter open the door, 'cause he'd shoot through it afore yer could wink, an' he might hit me, his friend, afore he knew it, 'stead o' you."

Nat Grute grinned as he said this, while Dan Walker watched Quaker Hi's performance with the iron bar with drunken gravity, but said nothing.

"Thee sees, friend Grute, that the hole through which I poke the bar is not more than four inches wide, just room enough to work the bar around. I don't take any chances from below. I don't see how we are to get the best of Peachblossom now, if he has got over the blow I bestowed upon him a few minutes ago."

"Gimme that bar," said Dan Walker. "I'll (hic!) soon git him out o' (hic!) that."

The burly miner staggered over to Quaker Hi's side and seized the bar. Just as he did so, the heavy iron leaped up, and striking Dan full in the chest, knocked him against Hiram, who in turn fell against Nat Grute and Pudge, and the whole four lay sprawling on the floor.

CHAPTER XVIII.

KITTEN TAKES A TRIP ON HER OWN ACCOUNT.

WHEN Kitten found herself alone in Red Bill's ranch, as Peachblossom disappeared through the hole after his companions, she obeyed the natural female impulse to examine the apartment in which she had been left.

"Wonder what's in that big chest?" she thought.

She tried to raise the lid, but it was securely fastened down with a stout hasp and staple. Then she went to the "front yard" and peered over the cliff.

"Dangerous!" she soliloquized. "By the way, I wonder where they were going to put Quaker Hi when they talked about dropping him over. Peachblossom said something about his striking a mule-path or something, and getting away to Chicago. I should like to find out."

Kitten looked around her, and tittered as an idea struck her.

"Don't see why I shouldn't. Wouldn't do any harm. They may be an hour or two afore they git hold of Hiram. I wish they'd let me go with 'em. I like to see a good fight, especially when I know that my side is going to win. There ain't any one around this hyar camp as

can get the best of Peachblossom, an' he'll make just one mouthful of Quaker Hi when he gets to him. Suppose Hiram should get the drop on him, though, from behind a door or something!"

Kitten's face became a little paler as this thought passed through her brain. Then she clinched her little brown hands and leaped upon the chest, as if she would squeeze through the hole in the wall and take part in the contest despite the drummer's commands.

"Pshaw! Peachblossom knows how to take care of himself," she murmured, as she stood irresolutely upon the chest. "I guess this isn't my put-in."

She jumped to the floor again with a short laugh, and taking from her pocket the revolver that the drummer had given her, looked around her cautiously and kissed it.

"Ain't I a soft goose?" she muttered. "I don't care. He's just the squarest, bravest, handsomest young man I've ever seen, and he's as good as he's handsome, too. Mighty good gun he's left me. Bet I could split a cent at a hundred feet with it."

She put the pistol back in her pocket after carefully wiping it on her apron, and picked up the coil of rope with which it was intended to drop Quaker Hi over the cliff when he took French leave of the company and plunged through the hole in the wall.

"Now for the rope and the mule-path. I wonder how Peachblossom knew about that path below. Saw it, I guess. He's got just the sharpest eyes I ever saw. Durned if he don't see everything."

She loosened the coil of rope, and let one end hang over the precipice, while she looked for something to which she could fasten it. Then she caught sight of a strong iron hook by the side of the trap through which her father and Pudge had entered, and which Red Bill had accidentally left unfastened, in spite of his asseveration to Peachblossom that he never neglected to secure it. The hook was evidently used to secure the trap, and was strong enough to support a ton or so without feeling the strain.

Kitten ran up the ladder with the end of the rope in her hand, and, in a minute, had deftly tied the rope to the hook with one of those useful sailors' knots, that tighten and become more secure as they are pulled.

"Funny thing to see dad and Pudge come tumbling through that trap," thought Kitten, as she burst into a loud giggle. "My, if Red Bill had shut it down as he thought he had, they would never have found it, and I suppose Quaker Hi would have been on his way to Chicago by this time. Never mind; it's all for the best, I guess."

With this comfortable conclusion Kitten completed her arrangements, and skipped lightly down the ladder. She felt in her pockets to make sure that her knife and revolver were all right, and then pulling up the rope again, put the noose around her waist and drew it tight.

"Now, I'll have to be mighty careful over this business, or I shall cut myself in half, or something," she continued, as she adjusted the rope.

She walked to the very edge of the precipice and looked over. Then she gathered the slack of the rope in her hands, grasping it firmly near the top, and let herself down.

There was wonderful strength in those slight arms, or the girl could never have sustained her own weight in that precarious position, dangling over a chasm thousands of feet deep.

She let herself down, hand over hand, paying out the slack as she needed it, and in a few seconds stood on the narrow path to which Peachblossom had referred.

"Good, so far. I'll take this rope from my waist and leave it hanging there, in case I want to go back the same way that I came, though I don't expect to do so," she said, as she suited the action to the word.

One glance was sufficient to show her that there was only one way to go.

The mule-path upon which she stood had by a convulsion of nature, been broken short off a yard or so from her. Tremendous masses of rock had become loosened and had dashed to the valley below, taking a large section of the path with it, and leaving a great gap of probably a hundred yards in width, between the two broken ends.

"That settles that," said Kitten, composedly. "I'll have to walk this other way. If that washout or lightning stroke, or whatever it was, had taken things a little more this way it would have stopped any one getting out of Red Bill's ranch by this route sure enough."

She looked at the steep wall of rock at her right and then at the gulch at her left, and with a careless toss of her head tripped lightly along the mule-path, which ran upward around the face of the mountain, with a pretty steep grade.

"Seems to me that I ought to strike that entrance to Quaker Hi's place after a while," repeated Kitten. "If I do I'll walk right straight in, as sure as my name is—Hallo, what's that?"

Her quick eye had caught a glimpse of a bush high up on the rocks at her right, which, mountain-bred girl as she was, she at once identified as that guarding the entrance to Quaker Hi's retreat.

"That's it, by jiminy! But how the deuce did it get up there? I don't see any path. And yet there was one or Hiram and I couldn't have got in."

She walked on soberly, trying to work out the problem in her mind, until she came upon a rude flight of steps cut in the rocks, and half hidden by straggling pines.

Kitten looked up the steps, and saw that after rising a considerable distance, they wound out of sight.

"I've struck it, sure. This is another way that dear man, Hiram, has of getting to his ranch. Well, I'd just as soon climb stairs as walk up-hill on an eighteen-inch mule-path: so here we go."

Thus saying, Kitten sprang lightly up the steps. She was young, active and hardy, and her breath hardly quickened as she made her way up some forty or fifty steps without a stop.

The steps wound this way and that, but, as Kitten had expected, they finally brought her out on the narrow path that led directly to the bush which hid the low portals of Quaker Hi's mountain home.

"Here it is, sure enough. Now what shall I do?" she said to herself. "I don't want to get into Hiram's hands again. At the same time, I should like to see how he gets along with Peachblossom and dad. I'll go in, anyhow."

Stooping down, she pulled the bush away and disclosed the entrance that has already been described. The low narrow passage was soon traversed, and she emerged into the cave at the very moment that Quaker Hi told Nat Grute to send Pudge away while they conversed.

Pudge came strolling carelessly toward her, and she felt sure that she was discovered.

The end of the cave in which she stood clinging close to the wall, was in deep shadow, and as the boy came nearer, she saw, from the vacant expression in his eyes, that he was dazzled by the light from the openings in the roof, and could not distinguish anything in her vicinity.

This would not last long, however, she knew. In a minute or so, his eyes would become accustomed to the gloom and he would see her. This would not suit her purpose just now. She did not see either the drummer or Red Bill, and instinctively she divined that he was the victim of treachery of some kind, though the nature of it she had yet to determine.

She looked around for some means of hiding herself.

Ah! Here it was! A long overcoat, of the ulster family hanging on a nail in a corner, with the bottom just touching the floor.

A swift movement, and Kitten was standing behind the ulster, completely hidden, while Pudge, rubbing his eyes, walked slowly forward and stood leaning against the wall, by her side.

She could hear him breathing in his snuffling way, as he carelessly reached toward the coat and felt in all the pockets while keeping his eyes fixed on Quaker Hi and his ears open to catch as much of his conversation as he could.

The pockets did not yield anything, for they were all empty, and Pudge sidled away to get nearer to Hiram and her father.

As he did so Kitten's face appeared among the folds of the ulster, and she, too, tried to hear what Hiram was saying so earnestly to her father.

Hiram turned half around, and Pudge skimmed rapidly back, bouncing so forcibly against the ulster that Kitten had hard work to restrain a scream.

From the mere force of habit, Pudge felt in each of the pockets of the ulster again, searching for unconsidered trifles.

When he reached the last pocket he withdrew his hand suddenly with an exclamation of pain.

"Durn that Hiram! What did he want to put pins in his pockets for. I believe that was about two inches long. My finger is covered with blood," he muttered, as he shook his forefinger.

Kitten, hidden in the coat, was shaking with laughter. She had put the point of her knife through the bottom of the pocket, and thus silently rebuked her brother for his pocket-picking propensities.

The conversation between Quaker Hi and Grute was now becoming so interesting that Pudge, still nursing his wounded finger by pressing it under his opposite arm, stole forward as near as he could to them.

Kitten, from her place of espionage, saw that Pudge was a goodly distance from her, and, unable to control her curiosity, forsook the friendly protection of her ulster and followed him on tiptoe.

Pudge was standing immediately behind Hiram, as he concluded his arrangements to go to Slippery Elm Hotel that night for the papers that he seemed so desirous to possess. He did not care whether his father saw him or not.

Kitten was behind Pudge, and kept just far

enough in the background to be unobserved by everybody.

Then, as the reader knows, the talk began about Peachblossom, and Kitten listened with all her ears.

She saw the business of the trap in the floor, and Hiram poking with his deadly iron bar, in the hope of striking the unconscious Peachblossom.

What should she do?

If the other inmates of the room had not been so engrossed by the efforts they were making to kill the young drummer, they must have seen her, and then all her hopes of assisting Peachblossom would have been at an end immediately.

Could she but get to the cave below, she might restore him to consciousness and help him to get Hiram into his power again. That was out of the question, however. The door was fastened with lock and bolt, and was, moreover, right before the eyes of Quaker Hi and her father.

She could not go around by the way she had come. It would take her at least half an hour, even if she could climb the rope to the "front yard" of Red Bill's ranch, of which she was by no means sure.

No; there was nothing for it but to keep out of sight and watch.

She had not long to wait for something to happen. To her intense surprise, she saw Dan Walker, whom she had not noticed before, arise from his rather hard couch on the floor and stagger toward the trap.

Then followed the movement of the iron bar, that threw Hiram, Nat, Pudge and Dan to the floor, and above their combined oaths and groans of dismay her own silvery laughter arose in a loud ripple, that startled and dismayed Quaker Hi more than would the sudden appearance of Peachblossom himself.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE ENEMY SCORES A POINT.

THE blow that rendered Peachblossom unconscious, when he ran down the steps to Red Bill's assistance, was a severe one.

For perhaps ten minutes he lay without a sign of life. Then his naturally strong constitution and extraordinary vitality began to tell.

One by one his faculties and senses returned, and at last he was able to sit up and wonder where he was and what had happened.

It was pitch dark save for the few stray gleams of daylight that made their way through the hole in the wall through which Peachblossom and his companions had come from Red Bill's ranch.

Peachblossom was not the man to sit still while in such uncertain circumstances. He put out his right hand and clasped that of Red Bill.

"Hallo, boss! You're hyar, then?" whispered Bill.

"Yes. What's going on?" asked the drummer.

"Wal, ther feels like as ef er dynamite foundry was er goin' on in my head," returned Bill, still in a hoarse whisper. "I'm all kivered with blood."

"So am I," returned Peachblossom, as he put his hand to his head. "But mine's only a scalp wound. A little court-plaster will fix me up. How is it with you?"

"Ditto, I guess. But such a crack ez that was is liable to make any white man's head ache, an' don't you forget it. I thought I wuz laid out fer good, by Jehoshaphat!"

"Yes, we were both put to sleep. Where's Grute and the boy?" asked Peachblossom.

"How should I know? I only jist came to when I felt your hand," answered Bill.

Both listened intently, but a moment sufficed to assure them that they were alone.

"Gone," said Bill, briefly.

"So it seems," was Peachblossom's careless response.

"Guess they didn't care about the job, anyhow, an' they took the first chance to sneak away," suggested Bill.

Peachblossom started to his feet and ran to the spot where the light showed him the hole in the wall.

"Bill."

"Yes."

"Help me up here."

Red Bill had arisen to his feet, and his head being still rather confused from the blow he had received, he could not tell exactly where Peachblossom was, by the sound of his voice, which, in the dark room, was the only thing that could have guided him.

"Where are you?" he added.

"Here, here—under the hole," replied Peachblossom, with more impatience than he usually displayed.

"All right, boss. I'm coming. But what's the next move?"

"Never mind. Help me up."

Red Bill felt around until he ran into the young drummer in the dark.

"All right. Up you go."

"Steady," continued Peachblossom, as he mounted on Red Bill's broad shoulders, and

clasping the edge of the hole, drew himself up and looked into the next apartment.

One glance was sufficient to inform him that Kitten was no longer there.

"She is gone, Bill."

"So? Wal, what else did you 'xpect?"

"We must find out first which way she went and with whom?"

"Cert."

"Help me to climb up the wall again, Bill."

"All right. Up you go."

The young drummer had again climbed upon Red Bill's shoulder, and was pulling himself through the hole when a scraping sound in the middle of the floor of the cave which he was leaving made him hesitate and look around into the darkness.

"Ah, Bill, do you see that?"

"What? I can't see nothin'," was Red Bill's surly reply. "I've got enough ter do ter hold you up."

"Look behind you up to the roof."

Red Bill screwed his neck around and then started so violently and suddenly as almost to throw Peachblossom to the floor.

"By Caesar! They are a-doin' somethin', an' I kin hear Grute's voice up thar, sure as shootin'," said Red Bill excitedly.

Peachblossom leaped lightly to the floor and stepped to the middle of the room.

A gleam of light—a mere thread—was streaming from above. It was so small that they could not be sure that it had not been there all the time, though escaping their notice.

Meanwhile the scraping noise still continued.

The drummer drew his remaining pistol (he had given the other to Kitten) and pointed it at the small aperture through which the thread of light descended from the apartment above.

"No, no," he muttered. "That would be of no use. The hole is not large enough to let a bullet through, for one thing, and even if it were, it is doubtful whether I should hit anything."

"What's that?" asked Bill.

"Nothing. Come over here."

"Here I am, at least I s'pose I am. It's so tarnation dark I can't be sure ez I'm anywhar for certain," grumbled Red Bill, as he placed his hand on the drummer's shoulder.

"Do you see what they are doing?" asked Peachblossom, quietly.

"No; skin me with a bar'l-hoop ef I kin."

"Well, they are trying to give you and I another gentle tap with that iron bar."

"The deuce they are!"

"Yes."

"Wal, I'll soon fix thet thar," said Red Bill. "I'll give thet thar Hiram a mark or two thet'll make his corpse ashamed of itself when they bury it. I'm goin' right up them steps and—"

"Stay where you are," commanded Peachblossom, holding Bill's elbow. "When I want you to make a fool of yourself I'll tell you."

The young drummer spoke quietly but there was that peculiar ring in the tones that Red Bill had learned to know meant business.

"All right, boss. You're the doctor. Go ahead and tell me what I am to do. But I should just like ter settle with thet thar Hiram once an' for all," grumbled Bill. "He wanted ter hang me yesterday. P'raps I may git a pull on the rope ez'll hang him. Durn his ugly picter!"

The scraping had stopped during the preceding dialogue, but it was now resumed more vigorously than ever.

Peachblossom had been trying to understand what caused the scraping, and now it became plain to him. It was the long, heavy iron bar, thrust through the small hole above, which was poking and digging at the rocky floor upon which he and Red Bill stood.

As has been already stated, the hole was just of sufficient size to give the bar "play," and no more. It was evident that some one was trying desperately to give Peachblossom and Red Bill a crack that would silence them forever.

The bar stopped its motion for a moment and the young drummer clasped it tightly.

He was compelled to depend entirely upon his sense of touch for guidance in his proceedings, but that was sufficient in his present undertaking.

He waited until the bar began to move again, then he whispered to Red Bill to take hold of the bar too.

After some little groping in the dark, Bill found the bar, and, by Peachblossom's directions held it very lightly.

"Now, Bill."

"Wal."

"I want you to do just as I tell you."

"Don't I allers do ez yer tell me? I wouldn't be hyar now ef I didn't."

"Yes, That's right. Well, I will count one, two, three."

"Yer will? What fer?"

"Wait till I get through, and don't interrupt."

"All right. I'm listening. Drive ahead."

"When I count three, grab the bar tightly and shove it up through the hole in the ceiling as hard as you can. You understand?"

"Yes. You bet I do. I only hope the other end will hit that white-livered old scarecrow, Hiram, right under the chin. Thet's all."

"Ready?"
 "Yes."
 "One!"
 "Hold on. Let me git a good hold. All right," said Red Bill.
 "Two!"
 "Now for a good one!"
 "Three!"

With all their force, the two men thrust the bar upward, with what effect we already know. Red Bill and Peachblossom could hear the noise of people tumbling about for a few seconds. Then all was still, including the bar, which had dropped down again, with its end resting on the floor by their side.

"Now, what's the next thing?" asked Red Bill.

"Have you any match?" said Peachblossom.

"No."

"Well, I have only one. We must take care of that. But we can't do anything in the dark."
 "There is a bull's-eye lantern in that thar big chest in the other room."

"There is? Why in thunderation didn't you say so before. Go and get it. We can light it with this one match, then we shall be able to see where we are and what to do next. I'll help you through the hole."

The two men made their way to the wall and in another minute Red Bill was wriggling through the hole into his own part of the cave.

"All right, Bill?" asked Peachblossom, as he heard Bill's heavy boots rattling upon the lid of the big chest.

"Middlin'," was Red Bill's guarded reply.

"Anything of Kitten in there?"

"Nothin'. But thar's a rope a-hangin' down hyar. She's gone by the same route we was a-goin' to send Hiram."

"Look over the cliff. Perhaps you can see her on the path below," suggested Peachblossom.

There was a pause during which Red Bill obeyed the suggestion, and then the latter announced that nothing was to be seen of the young girl.

"Strange!" muttered Peachblossom. "There seems to be a fatality working against that girl and against all her friends too, for that matter. Poor child! I'm afraid she has more enemies than friends in this part of the world."

He stood with his face to the wall, musing over the business that had brought him to this out-of-the-way spot in Colorado, while Red Bill pottered over the big chest in the next room in his search for the bull's-eye lantern.

"I think I begin to see my way clear," went on the drummer's reflections. "This rather lawless gentleman, Red Bill, will be useful to me, I think, and as for Hiram Placid, and Nat Grute, I think I am a match for them. Well, we shall see."

He moved slightly, as he looked up toward the hole in the wall, when suddenly each arm was seized by two powerful hands, and a sack was thrown over his head, almost suffocating him.

He kicked and he struggled, but to no purpose. His captors, whoever they might be, were too many for him, and he was utterly powerless, as they took him by his feet and shoulders and carried him away.

CHAPTER XX.

PEACHBLOSSOM IN A TIGHT PLACE.

As soon as the first shock of surprise was over the young drummer set his wits to work to decide what to do.

Under the immediate circumstances he knew that he could not do anything. He was held hand and foot, and moreover the thick sack over his head was almost suffocating him.

Ah, they were taking him up the stairs. Good, so far. He would at least be brought face to face with Quaker Hi, and would learn enough about his retreat for the knowledge to be of material assistance in his future investigations—provided he got out of his present scrape with his life.

Though he did not yet know for certain into whose hands he had fallen, save that Hiram Placid was one of his assailants, he had a pretty shrewd idea who were assisting that worthy in this attack upon him.

When having carried him up the stairs, they deposited him in anything but a gentle fashion upon the floor, and pulled the sack from his head, his suspicions were verified.

The first face upon which his eyes rested was that of the amiable landlord of the Slippery Elm Hotel, Nat Grute.

Nat was grinning triumphantly as Peachblossom's gaze met his.

The young drummer turned away his eyes contemptuously, only to see the cadaverous face of Quaker Hi and the grinning squat features of Pudge.

"Verily, friend Peachblossom, if that is thy heathenish name, thou art delivered into my hands and that of this truly good man, Nat Grute," said Quaker Hi, with a world of sarcasm in his whining drawl.

Nat tried to compose his villainous countenance so that it would in some slight degree look like that of the good man Hiram described him, but his one red bleary eye and his bullet head rebelled, and he looked more mean than usual.

As for Pudge, he did not try to restrain his mirth at this exquisite conceit of Hiram's. The idea of his father, Nat Grute, being spoken of as a good man was altogether too much for him, and he laughed until he cried.

"Yer young varmint, I'll break yer jaw ef yer don't keep it shet," said Nat Grute, wrathfully. "What are yer laughin' at, anyhow? I don't see nothin' funny."

During these remarks Hiram knelt on one side of Peachblossom and Nat Grute on the other, holding his hands firmly down, while Pudge, who had pulled the sack from his head, stood at his feet, watching to prevent his escape, in case he should be foolish enough to attempt it.

But Peachblossom saw that for the present, at least, his only course was submission, and he lay quite still.

Hiram Placid continued his homily:

"Now, friend Peachblossom, thou hast made thyself too busy in this, a strange land to thee. Thou hast interfered with the flocks and herds, the flesh-pots and the milk and honey of those who dwell hereabouts in tents, and—and—hotels and—"

Here Quaker Hi became somewhat confused, and Pudge grinned maliciously.

"Oh, talk United States," growled Grute. "You can ef yer want ter. Now, look hyar, Peachblossom, I'll explain this hyar matter—"

"Rah for you, dad. You're a dandy on a speech every time," broke in Pudge at this juncture.

"You shet up," was Nat Grute's ungracious response to these encouraging words.

"Yes, the voices of youths and striplings should not be heard in the counsels of their elders," said Hiram, solemnly.

"Wal, ez I wuz er-sayin'," resumed Nat—"Durn that boy! He's put me out. What wuz I er-sayin', anyhow?"

"Yer ain't said nothin' yet," suggested the irrepressible Pudge.

"Give him a swipe fer me, will yer, Dan?" said Nat Grute, to Dan Walker, who had gone fast asleep on the floor in the place that he had been thrown by the iron bar fifteen minutes before, and who had not been disturbed by all the noise and confusion of carrying Peachblossom up stairs and into the room.

Peachblossom started when Dan's name was mentioned, and when he noticed, for the first time, that the burly miner was in the place, even though he was in a drunken sleep, this young drummer felt a thrill of joy that perforce showed itself in his eyes, and a slight smile passed involuntarily over his face.

Quaker Hi saw the smile and exchanged a triumphant grin with Nat Grute. They knew why Peachblossom brightened up at sight of Dan Walker, and they knew that Dan was perhaps not as well disposed toward the young drummer as the latter believed.

"Wal, now we've got him what er we a-goin' to do with him?" asked Pudge, airily.

Peachblossom lay quite still without allowing the slightest interest in the proceedings to be visible on his face. He felt sure that he could count upon Dan Walker's assistance if he needed it, and he was not the man to show fear, in whatever predicament he found himself.

"How would it be to leave him hyar for a few hours till we can look through his valises and see what his game is in this hyar section. The police always does that, an' we are sort of police in this hyar case, you know," suggested Nat.

"There may be wisdom in that suggestion, verily," answered Hiram. "It will moreover enable us to take charge of sis—I mean Kitten—and to keep her from the evil company of this wicked young man."

As Hiram spoke, he looked nervously around. He was thinking of the laugh he had heard at the moment that the iron bar had sent him and his precious companions tumbling over each other on the floor.

He felt so confident, however, that Kitten was safely in the room below—in Red Bill's ranch—that he did not do what his suspicious nature would have suggested otherwise—that is, search the room in which he was to see whether perchance the girl might not be hidden somewhere.

Had he done so he would of course have found her, and the course of events would have been materially changed.

"Whar are yer goin' to put him, Hi?" asked Nat Grute, replying to Hiram's last words, "an' what 'bout Red Bill? I've got somethin' to say to him, durn his ugly picter!"

"I'll find a place to put him," quietly answered Hiram. "Peachblossom, arise. Nay, stay! Pudge."

"Wal."

"Search through the garments of this young man, and remove from his custody all his deadly weapons."

"All right, Hiram. Now, Peachblossom," said Pudge, cheerfully, "pony up."

The boy went through Peachblossom's pockets with the alacrity of a professional sneak-thief, and brought forth a pistol and bowie-knife, together with a pocketbook, a handkerchief, and other small articles.

Quaker Hi placed his hand on the pocket-

book just as Nat Grute snatched at the same object.

"Slowly, friend Nat. This pocketbook may contain important papers that Peachblossom fain would not lose. I will take it in my personal charge."

Quaker Hi grinned a long-visaged grin as he placed the pocketbook inside his vest, and continued:

"Put the other things back—except the weapons—we must not be dishonest, even with a scoundrel."

"But whar do I come in with all this hyar?" asked Nat Grute, rather taken aback by Hiram Placid's cool mode of appropriating everything.

"Thou shalt see when we get to Slippery Elm Hotel," said Hiram. "In the mean time, possess thy soul in patience."

Hiram laid the pistol and bowie-knife inside his desk, which he unlocked for the purpose, and fastened again, putting the key in his pocket. Then he went to one of the big chests that he used for cupboards, and brought out a pair of nickel-plated handcuffs.

"Pretty, are they not, friend Peachblossom?" he asked, sneeringly, as he held them up in front of the young drummer. "Put out thy hands."

Peachblossom, still without a word or look of remonstrance, allowed Hiram to fasten the manacles on his wrists, and then, at the word of command, stood up, with Hiram, Nat and Pudge standing closely around him, Nat keeping him carefully covered with his six-shooter.

With wrists fastened together, and no weapons, Peachblossom knew that resistance would be useless, but he depended upon Dan Walker or Red Bill, or both, to come to his relief before he had been captive very long.

Hiram took him by the arm and led him across the room to a corner, where, to a large staple driven in the wall, was attached a stout chain, on the end of which a dog-collar was still fastened, showing plainly for what purpose the chain had been used.

"Poor Grip, my dog, broke his leg a month ago, and I had to shoot him," said Hiram, "but his chain is still useful occasionally."

A heavy iron ring held the collar to the chain, and was fastened by a padlock.

Hiram took another key from his pocket and unlocked the padlock, leaving the iron ring open. Peachblossom could not help a gleam of hope passing over his face, as he saw how easy it would be for him to loosen himself if the ring was fastened to his handcuffs, as was Hiram's evident intention.

"Yes, friend Peachblossom, but I guess that would hardly be safe. We will do it another way. Yea, verily. Hold him, Nat. Pudge, get the other side of him."

He unlocked the handcuffs, while the three looked at him curiously. They soon saw what he intended to do.

He meant to fasten Peachblossom's hands behind him.

Peachblossom made a slight movement as if he would resist, but Hiram, with a sudden jerk, dragged the drummer's hands behind him, and secured them with the handcuffs.

Another instant, and the iron ring was locked to the handcuffs, and Peachblossom saw that without assistance he could never get out of the power of his enemies.

"Friend Peachblossom, verily I think thou wilt stay there till we come for thee," sneered Hiram.

Pudge hurst into a loud guffaw, and Nat Grute slapped the young drummer's face with his open hand in the extreme of his joy.

It was not without its punishment, however, for Peachblossom, with a flush of anger mounting to his pale brow, shot out one of his feet and gave the landlord of the Slippery Elm Hotel a kick that seemed to knock every bone in his body out of place.

With an oath, Nat Grute drew his pistol and fired, but not so quickly that Hiram did not manage to throw up the weapon with his hand, so that the ball flattened itself against the rocky wall above the drummer's head.

"Thou are too ready with thy weapons sometimes, Friend Nat," said Hiram, quietly, as Grute, evidently ashamed of himself, threw out the empty cartridge, replaced it with a new one, and shoved his revolver into his belt.

Peachblossom stood still, as unconcerned as if he were sitting in his own bedroom in Chicago.

The three desperadoes did not waste any more time.

They had a game to play, and they wished to bring it to a successful issue, but they did not know how soon some interference might arrive that would spoil all their plans.

The most important thing now was to get Kitten back to the Slippery Elm Hotel, where she would be safe, and to examine the young drummer's valises.

After a few minutes' consultation they decided to leave Dan Walker where he was on the floor, calculating that he would sleep for five or six hours, and that even if he awoke and killed the drummer it would not much matter.

Quaker Hi looked at Peachblossom's chain and handcuffs, and then, satisfied that he could not release himself, told Nat Grute to follow him.

He closed all the shutters in the ceiling except

one. To this he gained access by the ladder before referred to, and having reached the opening, stepped outside and told Grute and his son to do the same thing.

They obeyed, and the shutter shut down with a bang, leaving the drummer in total darkness, with the snores of Dan Walker breaking the stillness in long, measured cadences.

CHAPTER XXI.

A SUPPOSED FRIEND GOES BACK ON PEACHBLOSSOM.

PEACHBLOSSOM did not make the least movement for fully five minutes after the closing of the shutter. Then he turned around and stepped back toward the wall.

His chain jingled ominously.

He pushed his foot to the wall and felt for the staple to which the chain was fastened.

It was pitch dark, but it did not take him long to find out by the sense of touch, even with his shoe, that the staple was too firmly riveted to be easily displaced.

As for the handcuffs, they had been adjusted so close to his wrists that he knew escape from them was impossible.

"Uml! Caged this time, I'm afraid!" he muttered.

Then he recoiled, and the blood that ran through his veins and swept over his brain seemed cold as ice.

What was that? Surely he felt the clammy hand of a corpse passing over his face and neck, light as the touch of a bat's wing, but as certain as the blow from a prize-fighter's fist.

The young drummer, brave as a lion where men were concerned, felt his knees giving way as he tried to pierce the gloom that encompassed him like a black cloak on all sides.

It was gone now.

"Pshaw!" he said aloud. "Fancy!"

Dan Walker's heavy breathing, which had continued steadily, was here broken by a loud snort, as he shifted his position in his sleep.

"Of course," continued Peachblossom, "that is the explanation. Dan made a little noise and excited my nerves, and I was ready to imagine anything."

Even as he spoke, he felt again that deathly touch. This time there was no doubt about it. A hand, and icy cold!

With a desperate effort, Peachblossom overcame the paralysis that had seized him and pushed his face against the dead hand.

Then the hand was forced over his mouth, while an arm passed around his neck and held him tightly.

"Keep quiet. Don't even whisper, or I'll be darned if you won't spoil everything," said a voice in his ear.

"Kit—"

"Yes, of course it's Kitten, but don't mention it," went on the voice, as the hand pressed more firmly over his mouth.

"I—I thought it was a ghost," said the drummer softly.

"You did? Well, I'm a fish if that ain't a compliment," replied Kitten in the same guarded tones.

"Your hand is so cold."

"So would your hands be cold if you'd been standing in a draught for an hour or two. But never mind about that. I want to get you out of this right quick."

"But, Kitten—"

The little cold hand went over his mouth again, as she whispered imperiously:

"Silence, I tell you. I'm running this business. Ain't you got no sense?"

Peachblossom smiled to himself at the air of authority assumed by the girl. She was reversing the usual order of things in making him act under her directions.

There was the scratch of a match, and then the drummer saw by its light that Kitten stood before him with her knife in her hand, looking cautiously around.

She stepped lightly and swiftly to a corner, and picking up a pine-knot that lay half hidden under a pile of rubbish, soon had a blazing torch in full play.

"That's better than opening those traps, 'cause we don't know who might be looking in, don't you see?" said Kitten, with a smile.

Dan Walker gave an extra powerful snore at this moment, and Kitten, like a flash, turned, knife in hand, toward him.

"Gosh! I'm as nervous as an old woman," she said, with a laugh. "Poor old Dan Walker! He wouldn't hurt a fly! He's sleeping as sound as a dead coyote, too."

"Yes, he's all right. He may perhaps help us out of this scrape," acquiesced the drummer.

"What scrape? I ain't in no scrape; no more will you be in another minute," said the girl.

She came back to the drummer, and seizing the chain that secured him, examined the fastening.

"Durn this thing! I don't know how I'm going to get you loose now that I am here. This padlock ain't coming loose very easy, now, I tell you."

Kitten tugged and tugged at the chain, but she might as well have tried to knock a hole in the rocky wall with her bare fist.

"Gently, Kitten, you are making my wrists very sore," said Peachblossom, wincing.

Kitten looked around her, impatiently.

"I'll wake up Dan, and make him help us," she said, desperately.

"I would not be in a hurry to do that," remonstrated Peachblossom, quietly. "He is a noisy fellow, and we do not want any unnecessary noise just now."

"Suppose you're right."

"I usually am," was Peachblossom's cool response.

Kitten had been allowing her eyes to rove over the room as far as the shadows would allow.

Now she uttered a little cry of satisfaction as she caught sight of a bunch of rusty wire lying in the corner from which she had taken the pine knot.

She dragged the wires out and turned them over with rapid fingers.

"Just what I thought," she muttered.

"Do you know how to use them?" asked Peachblossom, who was watching her curiously.

"Yes," she replied, with a bitter smile. "Dad took care that I should know how to unlock a door, a padlock or a handcuff before he allowed me to learn my letters."

She carried the rusty wires over to Peachblossom.

They were skeleton keys.

Almost like magic, she applied one of the wires to the padlock that held the handcuffs to the chain, and Peachblossom was free from part of his bonds.

The chain dropped to the floor with a clang.

Dan Walker started slightly in his sleep, and emitted a sharp snort. Then he turned over on his side and slept sounder than ever.

Another application of a skeleton key and the handcuffs were off the drummer's wrists.

Peachblossom slowly stretched himself. It was a great relief to be free again.

Suddenly he darted to where the pine-knot was blazing, and throwing the ulster behind which Kitten had been secreted upon the flame, extinguished it in a second.

None too soon!

There was a rattle at the door of the narrow entrance through which it will be remembered Kitten had come in, and then the breathing of some one entering could be heard.

"Dan!" said the voice of Quaker Hi, "Dan!"

Dan Walker only snored a little louder, while Peachblossom and Kitten stood where they happened to be, as still as death.

"Curse that fellow! He sleeps like a log. Verily, friend Peachblossom, art thou enjoying thyself? It is nice and snug in here, eh?" he continued, with a sneer.

Peachblossom stole softly back to the place where he had been fastened, and stooping down, rattled the chain slightly.

"Verily that is answer enough. The chains speak for thee, and I know that thou art in the perfect enjoyment of my hospitality. Yet I fain would look at thee once more before I go. Wait while I strike a match."

This was what Peachblossom was afraid of. A light on the scene would reveal that he had been freed from his handcuffs and chain, and that Kitten was in the room. The ulster that had been her place of concealment before was now lying on the smoldering pine-knot.

"Verily I thought I had some matches," grumbled Hiram, and Peachblossom and Kitten could hear him fumbling about his clothes.

"Ah, here is one. Thought it strange if I hadn't a match in my pocket."

A scratch, and Quaker Hi was revealed with a lighted match in his hand.

As the blue flame struggled into a yellow, Hiram blinked and looked around him.

As his eyes rested on Peachblossom a cadaverous smile lighted up his countenance.

"Still there, eh?"

Peachblossom frowned, but deigned no answer.

"It is well! I don't know what made me come back, but I felt something in my mind that there was mischief afoot. I'll look at your handcuffs, anyhow, now I'm here."

The drummer had been standing quite still, with his hands behind him, in the same posture as if still bound.

As Quaker Hi lighted another match from the red-hot end of the old one, Peachblossom drew himself up in readiness for a deadly struggle.

He had no weapon, but he felt strong enough to strangle two such men as Hiram Placid.

Kitten had been standing back in the shadows, behind Hiram, watching his every movement.

Peachblossom, though he knew where the girl was standing, carefully refrained from looking toward her. He did not wish to direct Hiram's attention to her.

Hiram Placid, holding the match in his right hand stepped up to Peachblossom.

His eyes opened wide as he saw that the chain had been removed from the drummer's wrists and was lying on the floor.

His right hand sought his belt, and had seized the butt of his revolver, when a heavy rock struck him on the back of the head and felled him, half senseless to the floor.

Kitten, with the stone in her hand, stood over the prostrate Hiram, as she shouted to the drummer.

"Grab his revolver and let us chain him up. He'll be safer here than anywhere else."

Peachblossom took the revolver from the floor, where it had been dropped from Hiram's hand, and grasping the latter's shoulder, told him to get up.

"Curse you!" hissed Hiram, through his clinched teeth.

"Certainly, if you wish it," returned the young drummer, coolly. "I'll take the cursing and you try on the handcuffs."

Another second and Quaker Hi was wearing the handcuffs that had lately been around Peachblossom's wrists.

Pick up the chain, Kitten. I think it would be as well to make this gentleman quite safe, while we are about it," said Peachblossom.

Kitten complied cheerfully, just as the match which had been burning away on the floor where Hiram dropped it, suddenly went out.

"Light another match, Kitten."

The girl did so, and taking the ulster from the pine-knot, soon had her torch blazing again.

"Hallo, Dan!" said the young drummer, as he saw Dan Walker sitting up, and watching the proceedings curiously. "Come and join in the fun. We have your old friend Quaker Hi, here."

Dan Walker did not answer, and the young drummer continued his congenial task of securing Quaker Hi.

"There you are, Hiram. Now, you just stay there till I come back; I have some business at Slippery Elm Hotel, and I shall be away for an hour or so."

"Oh, you will, will yer? Wal, I dunno, I think ye'll stay right hyar!" thundered Dan Walker, as he seized Peachblossom and bore him backward to the floor.

"What's the matter, Dan? Are you crazy?" cried Kitten, in utter astonishment.

"No, I ain't crazy, but I don't 'low no robber of widders and orphans to stay 'round any camp whar I b'long," answered Dan, fiercely, as he pressed his sinewy fingers with a murderous grip into the young drummer's throat.

CHAPTER XXII.

NAT GRUTE SPINS A YARN TO RED BILL.

As Hiram Placid had said, he could not have told what made him go back to the cave to look at Peachblossom after leaving it with Nat Grute and the amiable Pudge.

He had struck the mule-path and was debating in his own mind whether he should go straight to the Slippery Elm Hotel or make his way into Red Bill's ranch, where he had every reason to suppose that he could find Kitten.

A moment's reflection decided him.

He did not care to let Nat Grute into all his plans, and he thought it best to let the girl remain where she was for the present, especially as her father did not say anything about taking her away soon.

"How long, friend Grute, must we journey ere we reach thy tent in the valley?" he asked, with his Quaker drawl.

"What tent?"

"The Slippery Elm Hotel."

"That ain't no tent. It's a good frame house, situated right on my own claim. Wal, it'll take us about ten years ef we move at this hyar rate. Ef so be ez we wuz to go straight to it, we ought ter git thar in 'bout an hour."

"Let us gird up our loins and proceed, then, friend Grute," said Hiram.

"Jist ez you say."

The three made a movement, and then Hiram stopped.

"It is of no avail, friend Nat, I must go back and see how that son o' Belial, Peachblossom, fares. I would not that my plans should miscarry for lack of caution."

"Wal, you kin go back yerself, I'm a-going home," grumbled Nat.

"Ditto, dad. An' without Kitten, too, eh?" put in Pudge.

"Durn Kitten. She'll find her way home soon. I don't care, now we've got that tarnal drummer tied up. The gal's all safe."

"Well, go thou on thy way, friend Nat. Verily, I will follow thee soon. I want to look upon mine enemy, the drummer, but for a passing moment, and I will ere long rejoin thee at thy hotel in the valley."

With these words Hiram turned his face up the path and walked briskly back to the cave, while Nat and his son made their way down the mountain-side toward the camp of Slippery Elm.

They had gone some distance in silence, Nat Grute not caring to talk, and Pudge knowing enough about his honored father's disposition to abstain from conversation, when Nat suddenly stopped.

"Dunno but what we mought as well," he said, pursuing aloud a train of thought.

"What?" asked Pudge.

"Sbet up."

"All right."

"I don't feel quite as satisfied as I oughter," continued Nat.

Pudge, profiting by experience, did not reply this time.

"She mought be all right, but then ag'in she moughtn't," went on Nat. "Eh, Pudge?"

Pudge stepped back a few yards and then said: "What are yer talkin' about? I dunno what yer mean by all this hyar gassin' 'bout she mought an' she moughtn't. D'ye mean Kitten?"

"In course I do, yer durned fool. Who should I mean?"

"Yer mought mean Queen Victoriay, for what I know. An' I ain't no more a durned fool than—"

Pudge dodged a piece of rock, weighing about a pound and a half, that Nat had thrown at him viciously, and did not finish his sentence.

Nat came toward him, and the boy hastily ran up the path.

"I ain't goin' ter hurt yer," growled Nat. "I'm only goin' back to the cave whar we left Kitten. Yer needn't run."

Pudge was a little doubtful, and it was only by very gentle degrees that he allowed his father to approach him.

No further hostilities were offered, however, and Pudge gradually drew nearer, and walked by the side of his father up the path down which they had come.

When they arrived at the junction where the path from below Red Bill's ranch joined that leading to Quaker Hi's den, Nat Grute paused and considered.

"Now, thar's some way o' getting into thet ranch from this hyar ledge, I know, but I don't 'zackly see whar," said Grute, thoughtfully.

"Wal, dad, let's go down thar and see. 'Tain't no use standin' hyar talkin' 'bout it," suggests the practical Pudge.

Nat Grute has in his heart a sound respect for his offspring's judgment, though he never confesses it, so he walks down the ledge without another word.

"Hello, dad, thar's er rope hangin' down, and by scissers it's from the very place whar we left Kitten," says Pudge, excitedly.

"Wonder what it means?" growled Nat.

"Means thet some one has kim down that way, I guess."

Pudge, as he spoke, seized the end of the rope and gave it a vigorous pull.

"It's hitched on something good and strong," he said, looking into his father's face.

"Climb up thar, an' see what's at the other end," commanded Nat.

"What's that?" asked Pudge, not relishing the job, which may take him into some unknown danger.

"You heerd what I said. Git up thet thar rope. Ef Kitten ain't thar, yer won't find nobody; an' ef she is thar, why she's what we want. Climb!"

Nat advanced threateningly, and the boy backed away. He could not go far, because the path ended suddenly, as has been already stated.

"Climb," repeated Nat, clinching his fist.

"All right, dad. But ef I'm killed, it will be your fault."

"I'll take the chances," returned Nat, with a grin.

"Of course. Ye'r' allers ready ter take chances when it won't hurt yer own skin," grumbled the boy.

Then he seized the rope, and, active as a squirrel, had soon climbed hand-over-hand to the cave above.

He gave one hasty glance into the interior, and then motioned to his father to come up too, without making any noise.

Nat Grute was a great deal more clumsy than Pudge, and it was a work of some labor for him to rejoin his son.

"Steady the rope, Pudge," he whispered, hoarsely, as he swung between earth and sky like an old kite on a telegraph-wire.

Pudge shook his fist to command silence, and then, reaching down with his other hand, dragged his father into the cave.

The operation was rather a noisy one.

There was so much scratching and scraping on the floor of the cave that Pudge's previous warnings to his father to be quiet were quite thrown away.

No sooner was Nat in the cave than with one accord he and his son threw up their hands above their heads.

"Thet's right, gen'lemen! I'm much obleeged ter yer fer callin', but I thought ez how yer mought like to hev a little exercise fer yer arms. Jist keep them thar for a moment."

The voice was that of Red Bill, and it was because Red Bill was standing with his back to the big iron chest, pointing two six-shooters at father and son, that those much-abused individuals were standing with their hands pointing skyward.

The chest was open, and its contents were strewn upon the floor.

Nat Grute's one eye glistened as he saw jewelry, watches and silverware glistening among bundles of papers tied up with dirty red tape, and he tried to form a hasty estimate of their value.

"Sorry we disturbed yer, Bill," said Nat Grute, in as pacific a tone as he could assume at short notice.

"Mind yer ain't more sorry afore I git through with yer," answered Red Bill, as he kept his pistols carefully poised in his hands, ready to wipe out one or both of his visitors, if necessary.

"Why, Bill? Ain't I allers been yer friend, eh?"

"Friend? Yes, you're a great friend! I'd ha' been swingin' ter a tree down in thet gulch ef you had had yer way last night, wouldn't I? Durn my skin! When I think of thet, I could—"

A menacing movement of the pistol in his right hand finished the sentence significantly, and made Nat's ugly face blanch.

"Hold on, Bill! Don't do nothin' rash!" he implored.

"Wal, what are yer doin' hyar, and whar's Peachblossom?"

"Meanin' thet drummer?" put in Pudge.

"Yes, meanin' the drummer!" repeated Red Bill, mimicking the boy's treble voice.

"Why, yer know, Bill," said Nat, whiningly, "we—we—"

"Whar's Peachblossom, I say?" roared Red Bill.

Nat Grute shot a glance at Red Bill from his malevolent one eye, that meant murder, but with a six-shooter pointed at his head, he dare not say what he would have liked.

"Do yer know whar the drummer is, dad? Ef yer do yer'd better tell Bill afore he shoots. I wouldn't keer so much, only he mought pull thet wrong trigger an' make cold meat of me 'stead of you," said Pudge.

At this dutiful speech Nat made a movement as if he would fall upon Pudge, but a suspicious shake of Red Bill's pistol restrained him.

"How should I know whar the drummer is? He's only a boarder at my hotel, an' I don't watch whar my boarders go all thet time. It wouldn't be professional," growled Nat.

"Wal, I'll give yer just three seconds ter tell me, an' then I'll blow yer ter—ter—the place whar ye'll hev to go some time or other, anyhow."

This delicate intimation was accompanied by a look that showed the speaker to be thoroughly in earnest, and Nat saw that he could not afford to dilly-dally any longer.

"Wal, Bill, yer know when we wuz a-pound-in' at thet door a-tryin' ter git to Quaker Hi?" said Nat.

"Wal!"

"Wal, yer know thet we got thet door open, an' thet Quaker Hi dragged us both inter thet thar room."

"Wal!"

"Wal. When we got in thar," went on Nat, very deliberately.

"Yes, I hear yer. What makes yer keep a-stoppin'?" asked Red Bill, impatiently.

"I ain't stopping, ef yer will give me er chance to talk," said Nat, keeping a wary eye on Red Bill's pistols.

"Go on, then."

"Wal, you saw how me an' Pudge wuz dragged inter thet room?"

"Yes."

"As soon ez we got in, yer know—"

"Yes."

Red Bill was intensely interested, and did not heed the fact that Nat and Pudge were both slowly creeping toward him.

"Ez soon ez we got in," repeated Nat, "we looked around us, yer know, an' I sez, sez I—"

"Yes."

Red Bill was still pointing his pistols at the two, but not as carefully as at first.

"Ez soon ez we got in—"

"How many times are yer goin' ter say thet? You told me you got in. Tell thet rest of thet story."

"All right, Bill. You are in such a 'tarnal hurry, I don't hev no chance at all," grumbled Nat, as he and his son got a little nearer.

Bill sat down wearily on the edge of the open chest, as if his patience was utterly exhausted.

Nat Grute and Pudge followed him up, and the former resumed his narrative in the same deliberate, tantalizing way:

"Ez I wuz a-saying—Hello! What's that behind you?" suddenly yelled Nat, looking with a frightened stare in his one baleful eye at the wall over Red Bill's head.

"Whar?" cried Bill, as he turned, pistols in hand, to look.

"Hyar!" screamed Nat, triumphantly.

Like wild beasts the father and son were upon him.

One push and Red Bill had tumbled in a heap into the chest, as the lid shut down and closed with a spring, while the mocking laughter of Pudge and Nat came faintly to his ears through the thick walls of his awful prison.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NAT GRUTE GOES HOME.

"WONDER ef he kin breathe in thar?" said Pudge, as he and his father straightened themselves after the exertion of placing Red Bill in the closet.

Bang! Bang!

"The varmint! He's a-fring through the side of the box. Durned if I didn't feel a bullet

whistle between my feet," said Pudge, as he and his father leaped to one side.

Two more reports followed, proving that Red Bill was determined not to remain in the chest if there was any possibility of securing release by shooting.

"I'll soon stop that," growled Grute, as he drew his own revolver.

"Don't, dad! What's the use o' wasting yer ammunition? He can't do no harm in thar. If he does make a few holes in the chest it'll jist give him air. That's all," said Pudge.

"Yes, but I want ter see what's in thet thar chest," said Nat.

"I know what's in it."

"What?"

"Red Bill."

Two more shots from the imprisoned Bill rung out and mingled with the boy's laughter, or Nat Grute would probably have resented his son's witticism.

"Durn his skin, what are we going to do?" muttered Grute.

Pudge did not answer, but he stooped down and collected the jewelry and watches into a heap and then began to stow them away in his pockets.

Nat saw this sign of thrift on the part of his son with approval, and joined him in the task.

"Keep over on this side, dad," suggested Pudge, as Red Bill fired two more shots through the front of the chest. "Don't you see all the bullets come one way? I guess Bill is kind of cramped in thar, so he can only shoot straight out. All you hev to do is ter keep out of range."

Bang! bang!

"Blaze away," continued Pudge. "He's fired ten shots now. I've counted 'em."

"Wal?"

"Wal, don't yer see?"

"What?"

"Why, he's only got two more in his guns."

"Hal!"

"And of course he can't get any more cartridges."

"Why not?"

"Why not?" repeated Pudge, in a disgusted tone. "Can't yer see nothing?"

Nat Grute raised his pistol, which still remained in his hand, as if he would bring it down on his son's shoulders, but seemed to think better of it.

"I can see ez much ez most men, Pudge. What d'ye mean?"

"Why, I mean ez he only has two bullets more, and when he has fired them we can open the chest and make him git."

"What fer? Why won't we keep him whar he is?" demanded Nat.

"An' hev thet drummer come down hyar and clean us out."

"Ther drummer? Why, yer durned fool, ain't we left him up thar all chained and tied up so ez he'll hev to stay thar till we tells him to git?"

"Thet's all right. But we've got ter let him go some time. I tell yer we daren't wipe him out. He's got too many friends. An' when he once gits out of the scrape he's in now he's goin' ter make it hot for some of us, sure ez shootin'."

I've seen thet quiet sort of men afore, an' I tell you they are dangerous."

Pudge spoke with an air of conviction, and his father, who knew that his boy had a way of seeing through things with a perspicacity beyond his years, listened to him with a great deal of respect.

"It may be ez yer say, Pudge, still—"

Two more shots from the interior of the chest interrupted Grute's observations. Then the lid flew up, and Red Bill, furious with rage, sprang out and seized him by the throat.

He had shot off the lock of the chest.

Grute was like a child in the hands of Red Bill, who evidently meant to throttle the landlord of the Slippery Elm Hotel this time.

That he would have accomplished his intent there is no reason to doubt had not his attention been diverted by something else.

He suddenly released Nat Grute, snatching the pistol from the latter's nerveless grasp as he did so, and rushed at Pudge.

"Drop that!" he yelled.

"What?" said the boy.

Red Bill's reply was to snatch a bundle of papers from the inside of the boy's shirt and place them in his pocket.

"I guess I'll let you two fellows go," he said. "I've a notion to wipe you both out, but I won't. Jist give up your weapons."

He pointed his revolver at Pudge as he spoke, and the boy handed out a pistol and a knife.

"That all?" queried Bill.

"Thet's all I have," returned Pudge, nonchalantly.

"Don't believe yer. But stand thar a moment; I'll go through yer myself in a minute."

He turned to Grute, who had been scowling at him with his one evil eye, and commanded him to give up his weapons.

"You hev my six-shooter in yer hand," growled Grute, sulkily.

"P'raps yer hev another."

"Wal, I ain't."

"All right. Pass out yer knife."

Nat did not like it, but he was compelled to obey. So the knife was soon lying under Red Bill's foot on the ground.

"Ther trouble is now I don't know zackly what ter do with yer," said Red Bill, reflectively, as he stood looking at Nat Grute, with the pistol balancing easily in his hand.

"Don't do nothing," said Nat. "What should yer do with us? We're respectable citizens, who don't harm no man."

Red Bill grinned ironically as he tossed his head slightly toward the big chest.

"Oh, yes, o' course we dumped yer into that thar box, but that was because you were goin' to shoot, an' we had ter do somethin', don't yer see?"

"Well, I'll tell yer what I'll do, Nat. You jist give me a pointer whar I'll find Peachblossom, an' I'll let yer go. But tell me the truth, 'cause ef yer don't, I'll get even with yer jist ez sure ez my name is Red Bill."

"Oh, I'll tell yer the truth, I ain't got no reason to lie ter yer 'bout it," rejoined Nat.

"Ef you had any reason you would lie, I s'pose?" said Red Bill with a sneer.

"I mought."

"Wal, never mind. Whar is Peachblossom?"

"Peachblossom is up in Quaker Hi's ranch, an' Quaker Hi an' Dan Walker is with him. Ef you think ez it's safe fer you to go up thar, why go, an' you hez my blessin' in the job."

Nat Grute grinned as he gave this information. He did not think that Red Bill would care about meeting Dan Walker, especially with Quaker Hi present, even to help Peachblossom.

Dan Walker and Quaker Hi had both been too eager to have a hanging match, with Bill for the principal performer, the night before.

"You're sure Peachblossom is up there?" asked Red Bill, looking Nat Grute straight in his one eye.

"You bet yer. Ef you'd seen how nicely Quaker Hi had him fixed up thar with handcuffs and a big chain you would know ez he wuz thar. A man hez ter stay in one place under them sarcumstances," returned Nat, with an ever-widening grin.

"What are they a-goin' ter do with him?"

"Dunno. Guess they won't do nothin' with him ez long ez he keeps quiet."

Red Bill reflected a few seconds longer, still with his eyes on Nat Grute's face.

Then he made up his mind what to do.

"Git!" he said, to Nat Grute, suddenly.

"What?"

"Git."

"Which way?"

"Why, the way yer come. Down thet rope. You, too, Pudge."

He half turned to speak to the boy, and then he started, as he saw that Pudge had disappeared.

"Hyar, you Pudge, whar are yer?" cried Red Bill, as with one eye warily on Nat Grute, to guard against treachery on the part of that honorable personage, he looked around the small apartment, and into and behind the chest, for the boy.

"Why, durn that boy!" exclaimed Red Bill, much mystified. "Whar did he go? I believe he is the devil's son, sure. Meanin' no offense ter you, Mr. Grute."

Nat did not say anything. He was not so much amazed as was Red Bill, because he had been watching his son's maneuvers, and saw the method he adopted to get away. He did not vouchsafe any information to Red Bill, however.

It was of no use looking around the ranch. Pudge had gone, that was certain.

"Slid down that rope when I wuzn't lookin', of course," said Red Bill. "By gosh, he's a cute young one. I only hope he won't be hanged afore his time."

"As you very nearly wuz last night, eh?" mumbled Grute.

"Git!" was Red Bill's only answer, pointing to the rope.

Nat, without another word, carefully let himself down over the ledge, and slid down the rope to the mule-path below.

It was easier for a man of Mr. Grute's build to slide down than to climb up.

As soon as he reached the path he shook his fist at the ledge behind which he knew was Red Bill, and then started on a run up the path.

"Now, look out, Red Bill, for I'm right on the kill," he muttered.

He had gone perhaps a dozen yards when looking behind him he saw Red Bill coming down the rope, with the evident intention of following him.

"Hold on, Nat," yelled Bill.

"What d'ye want? Didn't yer tell me ter git?" inquired Grute, savagely.

"Yes, thet's all right," responded Bill, as he caught up to him, a little short of breath, "but I want ter see thet you git in ther right direction, savey?"

Nat Grute walked on in silence, with Red Bill close behind him, until he reached the junction in the paths referred to before.

Here he stopped.

"Git, Nat."

"Which way?"

"Ter ther camp. You slide right down ter Slippery Elm an' tend ter yer hotel. It's jist ruin ter a business like yours ter let it run itself. Ther boys will be awfully thirsty by this time."

Nat stood irresolute for a moment. Then, as Red Bill still held the six-shooter in his hand, he turned without another word, and walked rapidly down the mountain.

"Remember Nat that I'll be able ter see yer from hyar fer a mile or two, an' I'll be er watchin' yer-till yer' out of sight," said Red Bill, with a warning inflection in his tones that Grute understood full well.

Red Bill stood where he was, and did watch Nat Grute as he plodded down the mountain-side.

Several times the landlord of the Slippery Elm Hotel turned around but each time he saw the tall figure of Red Bill looming up bigger than ever against the blue sky, and he knew that his way, on this occasion, lay toward the camp below.

Red Bill watched him until a bend in the path hid him from view, and even then he stood for at least a quarter of an hour with his eyes fixed on the bend to make sure that Grute did not come back when he might reasonably expect that his actions were unwatched.

But he did not come back. Probably he thought there was nothing to be gained by flying in the face of Red Bill at this particular time, and perhaps he felt a landlord's natural anxiety about the welfare of his already too long neglected hotel.

"Guess he's safe for the present," said Red Bill to himself, at last, as he retraced his steps toward the place where the rope hung down from the "front yard" of his ranch.

He found the rope just as he had left it, climbed by it to his place of refuge.

"Might have come up by my usual stairs under the cedar ef that thar big gap in the path wasn't thar," he muttered. "But it makes things safer anyhow an' safety is a mighty good thing in Colorado."

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHERE WAS RED BILL?

DAN WALKER'S attack upon Peachblossom was so fierce and unexpected that the young drummer at first could not make any resistance.

Then he recovered himself, and, putting forth all his strength clutched the assailant's arm and tried to force him to release his hold upon his throat.

But Dan Walker was a man who had been inured to hardship by a long life in a wild country, and acquired a strength such as is not given to ordinary men.

All that Peachblossom could do was to prevent the gigantic miner strangling him off-hand.

Kitten, who had been as much astounded as the young drummer, now flew to the latter's assistance.

But her puny efforts to drag Walker away were not even felt by him. He and the drummer were testing their strength against each other, and outside interference went for nothing.

Though it was pitch dark, the sounds of the struggle and the voices of the combatants told Quaker Hi what was going on, and he chuckled gleefully.

"Verily, the Philistines seem to be upon thee, friend Peachblossom," he croaked.

"Shut yer guff!" growled Dan, "or they'll be upon you, too."

Meanwhile Peachblossom was struggling with all his might to get Dan Walker's grasp from his throat.

If only he could get his hand on the knife that he knew was in Dan's belt!

The breathing of the combatants was becoming harder and faster, and still their relative positions remained the same.

It could not last much longer. The pace was too great for human endurance.

Peachblossom had made up his mind that strategy must supply the place of strength if he hoped to get out of his burly opponent's clutch.

Dan Walker never relaxed his hold on the drummer's throat, though he could not obtain a strong enough grasp to choke the young man.

Suddenly Peachblossom, who, as stated above, had been trying to hold Dan Walker's hand back from his throat, released the other's wrist, dexterously put his right foot behind Dan, and, with a mighty twist, threw him to the floor with a force that fairly shook the cave.

It was what, in wrestling parlance, is known as a back-heel throw, and was splendidly done.

Peachblossom was not the man to lose an advantage when he had once obtained it.

Dan Walker was taken completely by surprise by the young drummer's change of tactics, and rolled over on the floor as helpless as a lassoed steer.

"Wha—what—" he spluttered.

"I called the turn on you, Dan, that's all," said Peachblossom, coolly, as he knelt on the

giant's chest and pressed his strong white fingers into his prostrate foe's throat.

Dan writhed and wriggled, but his more active, if less powerful assailant had the better of him now, and could have kept him down as long as he pleased.

"Verily—" commenced Hiram, who, in the darkness, could not see what was going on, though he gathered from the remarks of Peachblossom and Walker that the latter had suffered a reverse.

"Shut yer lantern jaw, will yer?" was Dan Walker's savage response.

"But—"

"Shut up, I tell yer!"

Hiram did not wish to provoke any further controversy with Dan Walker just at this time, so he did as he was told.

"Kitten," said Peachblossom.

The girl had been standing quite still in the dark, waiting for the next move of somebody, as a cue for her own actions.

"Yes," she replied.

"Get a light."

"How?"

"With a match."

"I haven't any matches. You know that."

"No more have I," said Peachblossom, adding, to Dan Walker, as that worthy made a convulsive struggle: "If you don't keep quiet, Dan, something will hurt you so bad that we can never be friends again."

"What d'ye mean?"

"I mean that I shall kill you," was the cool reply, and Dan knew that he meant it.

"Well, say, Peachblossom, what about this match? I wish you'd quit monkeying with big Dan over thar, and tell me what I'm to do," broke in Kitten impatiently.

"See if Hiram has any," suggested the young drummer.

"The very thing. Durned strange that I didn't think of that before," said Kitten gleefully.

She groped her way carefully in the direction of Hiram Placid, and coolly went through his pockets as well as she could in the dark, in spite of his wriggings and muttered protestations.

"Here are some, Peachblossom, in a little tin box, all complete and regular," said the girl, after a few seconds' fumbling at Quaker Hi's different pockets.

She struck a match, and then as she looked around by its glare, laughed joyously.

It was indeed a comical sight that met her gaze.

Quaker Hi was standing helplessly handcuffed and secured by a chain on one side, while on the other, Peachblossom was kneeling upon Dan Walker's prostrate form with a look of perfect unconcern in his handsome face.

"Where can I find a candle or a lamp, Hiram?" asked Kitten. "I don't want to burn my fingers with this match."

"There is a lamp in that big trunk over there. Push that knob in the center of the lid, and you can open it," replied Hiram sullenly.

"Thanks, awfully," returned Kitten. "You have a real sweet way of fixing things. That knob is an immense idea."

She went to the trunk, as directed, pressed the knob, and then getting another match from the unwilling Hiram, lighted a small lamp and set it on the trunk.

Meanwhile, Peachblossom had not relaxed his vigilance with Dan Walker. He was holding him down while he parleyed with him.

"Dan, don't you think you are mistaken in me a little?" asked the young drummer, looking with his clear eyes straight into the giant's face.

"Dunno whether I am or not, Nat Grute—"

"Nat Grute!" broke in the drummer contemptuously. "Did you ever know him to tell the truth?"

"Wal, I never thought o' that, b' gosh!" said Dan slowly. "He ain't the honestest man I know, that's er fact."

"And yet you believe any story he chooses to tell you about me, eh?"

"Kid, I believe ez ye'r honest, I do, b' gosh! And I'll break that durned Grute's ugly head fer tryin' to set me ag'in' yer. I'm yer friend from this on, an' I'll see yer through the business ez brings yer hyar, whatever it is. Let me up an' I'll shake hands with yer. Dan Walker never goes back on a hand-shake, an' he's yer pal for life."

Like most hasty people, Dan Walker was very earnest and thoroughly emphatic. He meant what he said, and Peachblossom knew that he could trust him.

Without a word, Peachblossom released his hold on Dan Walker, and the two men shook hands heartily. Hiram Placid gritting his teeth with disappointment as he witnessed the reconciliation.

"Now 'Squire, what is yer next move?" asked Dan, as he straightened himself. "I s'pose you don't want to stay hyar, do yer?"

"No, Dan, I do not. My business will take me to Slippery Elm Hotel as quickly as possible. I think I can get some valuable information that I need down there."

"So? Something about selling laces fer thet firm ez you travels fer, I suppose, eh?"

"Not exactly."

"Tain't, eh? Well, whatever it is, Dan Walker is with you. But I should like a drink. It's an awfully dry atmosphere in here."

"Guess you'll have to wait till you get to the hotel, Dan," said Peachblossom, carelessly.

"Why don't you make Hiram give you a drink? Some of that water of Canaan he was telling me about," put in Kitten.

Hiram Placid scowled.

"B'gosh! You're er daisy, Kitten. Whar does he keep ther stuff?" said Dan, eagerly.

"I'll find it," said Kitten, as she lifted the lid of the big trunk and turned over its contents.

A minute's search and she produced a flask of liquor that made Dan Walker roll up his eyes in ecstasy as he took a long pull.

"My! Whater shame fer such a white-livered skunk to hev such stuff. Wonder whar he got it?" he said, as he stopped to take breath.

He was putting the flask to his lips again when Peachblossom placed a hand on his arm, as he said:

"Steady, Dan. One is enough now. Cork it up and put it in your pocket, if you like, but I want you to keep your head clear for a while."

"Squire, I guess you're right. I will put it in my pocket."

"Curse you!" hissed Hiram, to himself.

"Come along, Dan, for Slippery Elm Hotel. Come, Kitten, we'll take you, too, unless you want to stay and keep Hiram company," laughed Peachblossom.

Peachblossom carefully examined Hiram's chain and handcuffs, satisfied himself that no weapons were concealed about him, saw that every means of egress from the cave was secured, and then made the signal for Dan and Kitten to come away.

In another minute Hiram was caged in his own ranch, in utter darkness, while Peachblossom, Walker and Kitten were on their way down the hillside.

"Right down to the hotel, I s'pose, 'Squire?" asked Dan Walker.

"Well, no. I must stay and see whether Red Bill is in his ranch," answered Peachblossom.

"He was not there when I left it," said Kitten.

"I think he is there now," was Peachblossom's quiet response.

The rope was still hanging from the "front yard," and it did not take the active young drummer long to climb by it to the ranch.

He looked keenly around, and then bent his eyes to the ground.

"How is it, 'Squire? Is he there?" asked Dan Walker's voice, as that rather lumbering individual dragged himself slowly up the rope and peered into the ranch.

"Not a sign of him," answered Peachblossom.

"Thought we wouldn't find him," said Dan.

"I thought we would."

Dan Walker crawled into the ranch, and then Kitten came up the rope in her turn.

"I was wrong in saying that there were no signs of him. There are signs. If I am not very much mistaken, there have been several people here lately, and there has been a struggle. Look at all these marks of scraping and kicking. They have torn up the dirt pretty lively," said Peachblossom, as he looked around him.

"You're right, Peachblossom. Red Bill has had a picnic with somebody, sure. There were no marks here when I left," said Kitten.

Peachblossom tried the lid of the big chest. It was securely fastened.

"Where can he be?" he thought.

Dan Walker and Kitten were looking into each other's faces in blank wonderment. They could not give him any assistance.

"Can he have played me false? If I thought so—"

There was a stern frown on the face of the handsome young drummer as he thought of the possibility of treachery, and his hand involuntarily sought the butt of his revolver inside his well-fitting Prince Albert coat.

He dismissed the thought as soon as it entered his head, however. He was a student of human nature, and he knew he had won Red Bill's respect and confidence.

"Well, he is not here, and I don't know where he can be if he is not down in the camp," said Peachblossom, at last. "We must go the same way as we came—by the rope route—I suppose."

Kitten acquiesced by seizing the rope that hung from the "front yard," and lightly swung herself to the path below.

Dan Walker followed just as readily, but not so lightly, and then Peachblossom, after one parting look around the room, went the same way.

As he hung for a moment, with his head and shoulders above the edge of the floor of the cave, he was nearer to death than he had ever been since he was born!

The malevolent face of Quaker Hi, surmounted grotesquely by the tall hat, peered from the shadows of the opening in the wall above the big chest, as he pointed a six-shooter at the head of the young drummer.

"I can't afford it just yet," he muttered,

"or I would put an end to your interference at one shot!"

Peachblossom, all unaware of his narrow escape, disappeared, and Quaker Hi put his head through the hole to listen to the last sounds of the retreating trio.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SKINNY GAMBLER IN NAT GRUTE'S HOTEL. It was night when Peachblossom, Kitten and Dan Walker again stood outside Slippery Elm Hotel.

The door was closed, but sounds of mirth came through the wooden walls and told of the usual company of drinkers within.

Dan Walker was so touched by the thought of the fun that was going on inside that he felt constrained to take another pull at his flask.

"What next, 'Squire? Shall we walk right in?" he asked, as he smacked his lips.

"Not this way, Dan," interposed Kitten. "We don't want dad or Pudge to see us till we are ready."

"Is there a back door, Kitten?" asked Peachblossom, quietly.

"Yes, but it is always barred and bolted."

"Any windows?"

"That's so. There's my window. If I kin slip in that way and get around to the back door without any one seeing me I can easily let you in that way."

"I don't know what this is all about, but I'm going to see you through, Peachblossom," said Dan Walker.

The drummer's only answer was to place his small white hand in the miner's great paw and give it a hearty shake.

"You have a devil of er grip fer a tenderfoot, Peach. Durned ef yer haven't," was Dan's involuntary comment.

"Don't talk so much, but get around to the side of the house," interrupted Kitten, imperiously.

"Why can't Dan go in the front way? He can tell any story to Nat Grute that he likes. He may be able to help us, too, if he gets into the house first," suggested Peachblossom.

"That's so. But let us get out of sight first," said Kitten.

She and the drummer disappeared around the corner, and then Dan Walker opened the front door and swaggered into the bar-room in his usual blustering way.

Nat Grute stood behind the bar, dealing out the fiery liquor to his customers, and watching with his one red eye that he was paid promptly for every drink.

Pudge was acting as waiter, and took care that the group of poker-players at a table in one corner were well supplied with the whisky that never seemed to affect them albeit they swallowed it by the pint.

"Say, Nat, give me er drink. Durned ef I've had a horn fer a week," said Dan, as he leaned on the bar and looked into Nat Grute's face.

"Rats!" squeaked Pudge.

The whisky bottle was given to Dan Walker and he took a generous drink.

"Now, boys, everybody come up and take one with me."

There was a general movement to the bar, the invitation being accepted by all save the poker-players who remained absorbed in their game.

"Come on, boys. I want everybody in this hyar deal," yelled Dan, looking significantly toward the card-table.

"Everybody is in the deal," said Nat, hastily, as he set out the glasses and produced an extra bottle of liquor.

"Shut yer durned mouth, will yer, Nat? When I want yer to give me advice I'll let yer know. I'm running this hyar thing myself."

Nat Grute's one red eye flashed ominously, but Dan either did not observe it or did not care.

"Pudge," he said, "bring up them poker ducks. I want them to take one on me."

"They don't want ter be disturbed," said Pudge.

"Don't care what they want. Bring them up."

Dan Walker had imbibed just enough to make him desperately determined to have his own way. He did not long particularly for the society of the card-players in the abstract, but he did not like to be thwarted when he had made up his mind to anything.

The four men sitting at the table were not exactly the sort of people to be induced to do a thing against their will.

One, in particular, looked the very ideal of a dangerous character.

If he was not a professional gambler, then he should have brought a libel suit against his appearance, for a more evil-looking scoundrel it would have been hard to find in the whole Rocky Mountain region.

His face was largely concealed by an immense brown beard, while a broad-brimmed felt hat shaded his forehead and was pulled well down over his eyes.

These eyes were small and crafty, and moved restlessly, taking in everything in the room. His nose was long and thin, and the whole face was singularly unpleasant.

His hands, that deftly manipulated the cards,

were white, long and skinny, showing conclusively that they were strangers to the laborious work of mining.

He was winning at cards, and had several piles of poker chips on his side as testimony of his skill.

His three companions were ordinary miners, who had worked hard for every ounce of dust that they lost to the skinny man.

"Come, boys, and take a drink," repeated Dan Walker, as he walked over to the card-table and looked at the gambler.

"Not now, thanks," said one of the gamblers.

"Yes, now. See hyar, boys, when I invite a man to drink I want him ter do it. My name's Dan Walker, of Slippery Elm, an' I'm always ready fer er scrap when I'm insulted. Thet's me. I'm er fighter from 'Way Back, an' I don't take no bluffs."

"No one's er bluffin' yer, Dan," ventured Pudge, who foresaw a row, in which some one might be hurt.

"Shut up, yer young coyote, or I'll break yer cl'ar in two," retorted Dan, indignantly.

"Nat, put out ther whisky fer these fellows. They've got ter drink with me," he added, scowling at the skinny man.

The latter, who had been coolly shuffling the cards while Dan was talking, now arose, and motioning to the other players, who involuntarily obeyed him, walked over to the bar.

Slowly he poured out a glass of liquor, keeping his shifty eyes turned in the direction of the big miner until his glass was full.

"Thet's right," said Dan, whose good humor had quite returned now that he had carried his point. "Take er good one."

"What's that?" suddenly exclaimed the skinny man, looking toward a distant corner of the saloon.

"What?" asked Dan.

"Thought I heard a noise like a window opening. 'Thet's all," said the other, quietly.

Dan Walker started. He had been so much occupied over his own little dispute, that he had forgotten all about Peachblossom and Kitten.

"Thet's nothin'," he said, hastily. "Here's a go! Drink hearty!"

The skinny man raised his glass half-way to his lips, and then put it down again.

"There it is again. There's something going on out there. Wonder what it is?"

He moved hastily toward the back of the room, where the slight noise of an opening window was quite evident to his quick ears.

"Hold on hyar, stranger. Take yer drink," said Dan Walker, desperately.

"Wait a minute," said the skinny man, trying to pass.

Dan Walker knew that he must prevent any one finding Kitten and Peachblossom at this particular time. He did not know just what the young drummer's business was, nor did he care. He had promised to see Peachblossom through, whatever it was, and he would keep his word.

The skinny man made a rush, Dan put out his feet, and the next minute the skinny gambler was sprawling on the sawdusted floor.

With a howl of rage he was on his feet again, pistol in hand.

"Curse you!" he howled.

There was a report, and a bullet-hole shone through the crown of Dan Walker's hat.

He felt the bullet graze his hair.

Before Dan Walker could draw his own weapon, the skinny gambler had fired again.

This time, however, Pudge knocked up his arm, and the bullet was buried in the logs of the ceiling.

Dan rushed at the gambler now, and seizing his wrist, turned the muzzle of the pistol back, so that if it was discharged the bullet would enter the body of its owner.

"Durned fool! I could kill yer if I wanted ter!" said Dan. "D'ye want me ter do it?"

The gambler glared at him, but made no reply.

"Oh, let up on him, Dan. He was mad for a minute. He's all right now."

The gambler opened his hand and let the pistol drop on the floor in token of a truce.

Dan released his wrist, picked up the pistol and handed it to him, the gambler putting it in his pocket, as if nothing had happened.

Then he put out his hand for Dan to shake.

Dan drew back.

"You'll hev to excuse me, stranger," he said. "I don't know just why it is, but I feel somehow ez ef I can't shake hands with yer."

"Why not?"

"Don't know, 'zackly. It's a queer sort o' feelin' ez I hev. I guess you are a squar' man, an' ez white ez they make 'em in Colorado, but I'd ruther not shake just now."

The gambler shrugged his shoulders.

"As you please."

"Thank ye—yes. Ez I please. Thet's so. All right. Let's take another drink instead."

This time the skinny gambler disposed of his glass of liquor without cavil. Then, nodding to his three companions in the poker game to go back to the card-table, he walked back to his chair to shuffle the cards again.

It might have been noticed that he did not sit in exactly the same position as before, but

placed himself so that his sharp little eyes could sweep the whole of the rear of the saloon while he appeared to be absorbed in pairs, ace-fulls, royal-flushes, jack-pots and other jargon of the great American card game.

Dan stepped carelessly to the back of the saloon, puffing at a big cigar.

Had Kitten got in yet? And where was Peachblossom?

The gambler was watching the back of the saloon keenly.

Dan Walker leaned carelessly against a door that led into the kitchen in which Kitten always reigned supreme. It was nothing more than a shed, built out from the house, but it afforded direct communication with the bar-room. There was also a door in it leading to Kitten's bedroom.

Something caused Dan, when he thought that the skinny gambler was intent upon his game, to open the door of the kitchen a little way, and slip into the room.

"All right, Dan?" said Peachblossom's voice. "Guess so," was the answer. "But you can't most always tell."

"Hullo, Dan?" suddenly interposed Nat Grute's hoarse tones; "come and take a drink."

The landlord of the Slippery Elm Hotel had opened the door and was standing with his red head poked through the doorway.

He swept the apartment with his one eye, and saw, besides Dan Walker, a rough-looking miner, with a red handkerchief wound around his forehead, and a general hang-dog manner.

Kitten had a minute before slipped into her room.

"All right, Nat, I'm with you. This hyar's my friend from the mountains, Jack Neeley. He's been on a spree for a week past, an' I guess he don't know how he got into this hyar room unless he kim in through that thar window."

"An' be the powers, I kim in that same way, d'ye moind," said the miner, with a sleepy grin. "I kim mighty nigh shplinterin' the neck av me, too, be gob."

The speaker rolled out of the room behind Dan Walker and sidled up to the bar.

"Ah, an' it's ye'self that's a foine figure of a mon, Muster Groot," he said, in a rich Corkonian brogue, as he stood up to the bar and poured out a little whisky into his glass. "Sure, an' this is mither's milk to me. I wuz raised on it in the darlin' ould sod."

He evidently wished to be on good terms with Nat Grute.

"Ain't seen yer in these hyar parts afore," said Grute. "Stranger 'round hyar, eh?"

"Yes, I'm a-diggin' in a claim t'other side uv ther range beyant. But, be jabers, it's a mighty poor business, for devil a ha'porth av goold or sulver have I doog out uv it yit, at all, at all."

"Wal, drink down yer liquor," said Dan, setting the example.

"Be gob, yes; this is the stooff that'll make a mon grow big an' purty," said the Irishman, enthusiastically, as he raised his glass to his mouth.

The skinny gambler never took his eyes from the Irishman, though he still managed to keep up his part of the poker game, to the pecuniary loss of his opponents.

He noticed that the Irishman, in spite of his loud talk about whisky being "mither's milk," threw the contents of his glass upon the floor, without suffering a single drop to pass his lips.

There was a peculiar gleam in the skinny gambler's little eyes, and he bestowed more particular attention upon the strange Irishman.

"Begorra, but I'm toired. C'u'dent yer guv me a place where I c'u'd git me a shmall tashte uv a shlaope. Most anywhar u'd soot me, Muster Groot."

As the Irishman spoke he staggered against the bar, and really did look as if he was only fit to lie down for a few hours, to sleep off the effects of the debauch in which he had evidently been indulging.

"Hain't yer got er room yer could put my friend in?" asked Dan, looking at Grute. "He's a nice, quiet sort of man when he's sober, an' he's a-tryin' to sober up now."

"Wal, I dunno. Thar's thet Peachblossom's room over thar. He's gone away somewhar, an' I don't know whether he'll be back to-night or not. Guess he kin tumble in thar."

"All right, Nat. I'll put him to bed," said Dan. "Is ther door unlocked?"

"Pudge'll onlock it," answered Nat.

The boy, who seemed to be all ears and eyes, and to know all that was going on without effort, sidled up to the door, and drawing a key from his pocket, unlocked it and beckoned to Dan.

"Come on, Jack."

"Indade an' I will, Dan. Sure you're a broth uv a b'ye, an' you're me friend. Where's the room I'm to shlaope in?"

The Irishman staggered across the room, and fell into the room head-first.

Dan Walker followed him quickly, taking the key out of the door as he did so.

As the door closed with a bang, and the sound of its being locked on the inside was heard, the skinny gambler sprung across the room, and

was about to seize the handle of the door, as if he would force his way in.

Pudge interposed his small person, however, and, as he put his hand on the gambler's chest to hold him back, whined, in an injured tone:

"Ain't you got no patience?"

"Not enough to last till morning," hissed the skinny gambler, with a fairly devilish look of hate in his beady eyes.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOW PUDGE GOT HOME.

DOUBTLESS the reader is rather surprised to meet Pudge in his respectable father's hotel so soon after he was lost in Red Bill's ranch up in the mountains.

The explanation was a simple one. While Red Bill and Nat Grute were arguing, Pudge thought he might make something by hiding for a time, and getting another chance at the big chest and its rich contents.

The boy's cupidty had been excited by the treasures he had seen there, and he disliked very much to let any opportunity slip by which he might secure at least part of them.

So, when he saw his chance, he slipped easily through the hole into the next room, where he crouched down in the darkness and waited for the next turn of events.

Red Bill missed him, as we know, but he did not think it possible that the boy could have got through the hole in the rapid and noiseless way that he had, and therefore did not take the trouble to search in the adjoining room. Even if he had done so it is very doubtful whether he could have found the boy in the shadows of the large dark room.

Pudge had plenty of patience, so he did not mind waiting until he could get a clear field at the big chest.

He sat still in a corner in the dark, with his head against the rocky wall, and in due course, dropped asleep.

"How long he slept he did not know. It was probably not more than ten or fifteen minutes, though it seemed much longer to him.

He awoke with a start, and stood up.

Cautiously he climbed up the wall to the hole, and peered through. He found enough chinks in the wall for him to hold to, and, agile as he was, experienced but little difficulty in getting up to the hole so that he could look through.

A glance around convinced him that the outer room of Red Bill's ranch was quite empty, as far as human beings were concerned.

Like a cat he slipped through the hole and stood upon the top of the big chest.

"He broke ther lock, so I oughtn't to have any trouble about opening ther lid," said Pudge to himself.

Then he started back and rubbed his eyes in astonishment.

"Why, durn me ef the lid ain't gone an' growed into the box. What ther—"

A long whistle finished the sentence.

"You're er slick one, Red Bill, but ye'll hev ter git up mighty airly in ther mornin' to fool anybody named Grute," continued the boy, as he saw the explanation of his mystification.

Red Bill could not lock the box, so he had done what he considered was the next best thing. He had turned the box upside down, so that it rested on the lid.

Pudge was not as strong as Red Bill, but that box had to be placed right side up if he was going to get his fingers into the treasure it contained.

He was in a boiling perspiration and thoroughly disgusted with his task when he at last got the chest turned over.

Yes, here was the broken lock, and the lid could be raised without trouble.

What was this? Pudge fairly tore his hair as he peered into the big chest and saw that Red Bill had euchered him, after all.

All the jewelry and papers that he had seen before had disappeared, and the only things the chest contained was a few old clothes, not worth stealing, and a large iron box fastened with two Yale locks, and clamped to the sides and bottom of the chest.

What was in this iron box would ever remain a hidden secret from Pudge unless Red Bill should see fit some day to show them voluntarily.

"Wal, gol-durn thet thar Red Bill!" he muttered. "Why didn't ther boys string him up when they hed ther chance. He oughtn't ter be 'lowed to lived with respectable folks!"

There was nothing to be gained by idle lamentations, and Pudge was too smart a boy to waste his time that way.

"I guess I might ez well do as dad has done, an' git toward home. If the old man has to serve ther boys himself while I'm away he'll jump on my neck when I do get back. 'Specially if Kitten ain't got home yet from her constitutional in the mountains."

It will be remembered that neither Pudge or his father knew at this time of the turn things had taken in Quaker Hi's retreat.

They had left Peachblossom securely bound and had seen Quaker Hi go back to take one more look at the young drummer.

"I s'pose Hiram has gone down the mountain to the hotel by this time," reflected Pudge.

"Wonder how Peachblossom likes it. Kind of a pity of him too. I believe he's one of the whitest fellers ez ever kim into Slippery Elm, too. Still, we must take care ov ourselves, as dad would say."

Pudge was a boy of action, so he did not waste any more time in reflection.

He had made up his mind to visit Peachblossom in his captivity, and he had thought of a way to do it.

Through the hole in a twinkling, and then he groped his way across the dark cave until he stumbled against the step that led to Quaker Hi's particular sanctum.

The boy had learned a secret of the fastening of this door that Hiram Placid had meant to keep to himself. He had not largained for Pudge being quite so sharp.

A twisting of a small bolt that the boy found, after a little feeling around, opened the door for him, and he stepped noiselessly into the room.

He dropped upon the floor and listened.

He could hear the breathing of some one at the other end of the apartment.

"He's still alive, anyhow," he thought.

"Hallo, Peachblossom," he said, aloud.

No answer.

"Peachblossom?"

Nothing but the steady breathing.

"Peachblossom, what's the matter with you? Why don't yer say something?"

"What's the matter with yer?"

The boy started. Those gruff tones did not belong to the young drummer.

"Who is that over thar?" asked Pudge, a little nervous in spite of himself.

It was pitch dark, and he could not see an inch before his nose.

"Why don't you come over and see?" repeated the gruff voice.

Pudge knew now who it was, and he ran forward into the darkness without hesitation.

"All right, Hiram. Here I am. Wait while I git a light."

He took a match from his pocket and struck it. As soon as its glare enabled him to see Quaker Hi fastened up in the same way that he had left the drummer, he dropped it, and left the scene in darkness again.

"Light that lamp, friend Pudge, for my soul doth sorely need it," said Hiram, relapsing into the whining drawl that had become habitual to him save in moments of strong excitement.

Pudge did not say another word until he had obeyed Quaker Hi's instructions.

Then he stood back and chuckled delightedly.

"Just like a down-east turkey ready for cookin', by jiminy. Say, Hiram how do them thar bracelets fit yer! I thought ez they belonged to the drummer, too. What made him give 'em up to you?"

"Curse him!" hissed Hiram.

"Of course. That's what we all say 'round hyar when er feller gets away with us."

"Help me to get out of this, friend Pudge. I am sorely oppressed by the Philistines," said Hiram weakly, resuming his canting manner as quickly as he had dropped it.

"Whar's ther key to them thar handcuffs?" asked Pudge, deliberately. He rather enjoyed seeing Hiram in his present predicament, and did not wish to disturb himself by any undue haste.

"In my vest pocket, friend Pudge. Be thou quick, for, verily, thy servant's hands are chafed by the bonds of mine enemies."

In due time Pudge had unlocked the handcuffs and released Hiram from the chain that secured him to the wall.

Hiram's first proceeding upon securing his freedom was to go to the big trunk, and take a bottle bidden at the very bottom.

The bottle contained liquor, and Hiram took a generous pull to steady his nerves.

Then he searched still further and produced a cruel dirk-knife and two handsome six-shooters.

The latter he loaded carefully and hid in his pockets, the knife fitting into a scabbard inside his vest.

"Can't yer give me some kind of weapon? I'm left as bare as a new chicken. I hev been held up since I saw you last," said Pudge, plaintively.

Hiram, without a word, fished another knife out of the trunk and gave it to the boy who took it in a matter-of-fact way and hid it in his shirt.

"Now, friend Pudge, we must haste to thy father's abode, for verily that heathenish drummer is on his way thither, and we must confound his plans."

"All right Hiram; anything to git out o' here," said Pudge, carelessly.

In another moment the two had left the cave, Hiram carefully closing the entrance after them, and leaving everything as secure as he could make it.

CHAPTER XXVII.

QUAKER HI SCORES ANOTHER POINT.

No sooner was Neeley, the drunken Irishman inside the bedroom, with the door safely locked,

than he straightened up, and looked inquiringly at Dan Walker.

"Wal, 'Squire," said Dan.

The Irishman pulled off the fringe of red whisker that he had been continually caressing while in the bar-room, and showed the handsome, aristocratic features of Peachblossom, the drummer detective.

"Wal, 'Squire," repeated Dan Walker.

"Where's Kitten?"

"In her room, I guess. You don't want her, do yer 'Squire."

"I certainly do."

"Why?"

"She can help us."

"Woman's wit, eh?"

"Yes."

"Wal, you'll hev to git to see her, I s'pose. Lie on that bed, putend your drunk. I'm a-goin' inter ther bar-room ag'in."

Peachblossom hastily resumed the red whiskers and Dan opened the door and went out.

Peachblossom heard the lock turn on the outside and leaped from the bed.

"Treachery."

The word escaped him involuntarily. Then he smiled as he sat down on the bed again and waited.

"Dan thought the best way to keep out intruders was to lock the door. Had I done it myself our friends in the bar-room might have thought I was not quite so drunk as I seemed."

"Wal, Dan, how's your pard in thar?" asked Grute, with a grin, as the big miner stepped into the bar-room.

"Oh, he's all right, but he's got to be let alone, or there may be danger," said Dan, with a meaning look at the skinny gambler, who had left the poker table and was standing in the middle of the floor, with his hands in his pockets.

"Danger? Who to, stranger?" asked the skinny gambler.

"P'raps ter himself and p'raps—to some one else," returned Dan, as he stepped up to the bar, calling: "Come, boys, take a drink."

The response was general this time, the skinny gambler being one of the first to accept the invitation.

The drinks disposed of, Dan Walker opened the front door and walked out into the night, as if a sudden fancy to get a little fresh air had seized him.

The skinny gambler leaned over the bar and seized Nat Grute's arm, as he whispered eagerly:

"What does that mean?"

"I dunno what it means, but I know ez you're makin' a durned fool o' yerself, and setting all the boys to wonderin' by grabbin' my elber this hyar way," growled Grute.

The gambler seemed to recollect himself, for he released the other's arm and strolled with assumed calmness to the front door by which Dan Walker had disappeared.

He opened the door, stepped out into the darkness, and—ran plump against Dan Walker.

The burly miner pushed him back with such force that his head sounded with a terrible thwack against the door-post.

"What are yer a-doin' a-follerin' me around? Durned ef I don't let daylight inter yer of yer do it again," roared Dan.

The gambler made a slight movement as if to draw a weapon, but Dan's pistol was out in a flash, and as he pointed it at the gambler's head, the big miner said, coolly:

"Don't yer do it. I hev the drop on yer, and I am almighty slick at pullin' a trigger."

"I am not going to do anything, but I don't know what you mean by saying that I am following you around," returned the gambler, livid with passion.

"Oh, yer don't, eh? Wal, let me tell yer thet I know who yer are, an' I can speak yer durned name right here, Mr.—"

"Hold on! Don't do it," interrupted the other, hastily. "I ain't ashamed of my name, but I don't want it mentioned just now."

"All right, then. Jist go inside an' tend to yer business, ef yer hev any. I am a-goin' to take a quiet smoke out hyar for a few minutes."

Dan Walker opened the door of the saloon as he spoke, and the gambler, having practically no option, walked reluctantly inside.

No sooner was the door closed than Dan Walker changed his lounging manner for one of activity unusual to him.

He ran around to the back of the house and tapped cautiously at the window of the kitchen-shed through which Jack Neeley, the drunken Irishman, had made his entrance.

"Kitten!"

"Yes."

"Let me in hyar."

"All right."

A very slight creaking of a bolt and the window opened, showing the face of the girl.

Dan Walker made a movement as if he would crawl in. Then he stopped.

"What's the use of my comin' in this hyar way? Ther drummer wants ter speak ter yer. He's in his own room. I jist wanted ter tell yer. Thet's all."

"Well, what do you want me to do?" asked Kitten. "Why don't you speak plain?"

Kitten was a girl, and liked to tease for the mere pleasure of teasing.

"I do speak ez plain ez I kin," returned Dan. "You git inter his room, an' I'll be with yer ez soon ez I kin git 'round. He wants ter ask yer some questions thet are mighty important, he says."

"Important to who? What hev I got to do with them?"

"Durned ef I know. S'pose you go an' ask him? Then you'll probably find out all about it."

Dan Walker said this triumphantly, as if he thought he had clinched the argument.

"Git, then," said Kitten. "I'll go. Are you sure there is no one sneaking around the bar-room watching for me to see what I'm doing?"

"Of course I'm sure. How could any one see you through a thick wall of good two-inch pine? (Guess you must be gittin' soft, gal," said Dan Walker, contemptuously.

He dodged as he said this, thereby just succeeding in getting his head out of the way of a very hard cake of soap that Kitten picked up and threw at him like a flash.

Then she closed the window down and disappeared, while Dan Walker strolled around to the front of the hotel, and went into the bar-room.

"Aha!" said the skinny gambler, coming from behind a big pine, as Dan left the window.

"You thought you could fool me, eh? I think I'm a little too much for you, you big, thick-headed fool. You thought because I went into the bar-room that I would stay there and let you have all the fun to yourself out here. Not much. I have too big a thing at stake in this game."

The skinny gambler had heard all that passed between Dan Walker and Kitten, and he had made up his mind to keep the girl away from Peachblossom at all hazards.

"This is your last chance," he muttered.

"Once let that cursed drummer get an interview with the girl in that room, and she will tell him enough, without knowing it, to give him a clew. Then, Leonard Bolton, you may as well throw up the sponge."

As the skinny gambler spoke, he took off his slouch hat to let the night breeze cool his forehead. The clouds that had hidden the moon parted, and as the light shone upon his face, it showed the evil features of Leonard Bolton, known to Slippery Elm as Quaker Hi.

He stood for a moment in deep thought, and then, making up his mind apparently, threw his hat on his head and pulled it down over his brows. Then he felt in his pockets to make sure bowie-knife and pistol were ready for use.

"I don't know that my disguise will help me much, but it may be of some use," he thought.

He looked furtively around, to make sure that he was not observed. Then he sprang lightly to the window and tried to raise it.

It yielded to his pressure.

"Good! I thought that girl was too mad at Dan Walker to care whether she fastened the window or not."

He pushed the window up until there was room for him to get through. Then, active as a cat, he crawled through the opening and stood in the kitchen.

"Guess I had better leave this window open so that I can get out easily if I have to," he muttered.

A piece of kindling wood, some two feet long, lay on a shelf at the side of the window, evidently used for propping up the window for ventilation purposes in good weather. Quaker Hi put the wood in place and secured the window, and then dropped upon the floor against the wall as the door of Kitten's room opened, and the girl appeared.

"Don't remember leaving that window open," muttered Kitten. "I s'pose I did though, so that I could git a good shot at that Dan Walker with the cake of soap. My! wouldn't his head have rattled if I'd managed to hit him with it?"

She tripped lightly to the window, and had seized the piece of kindling, when a bony hand grasped her throat, while Quaker Hi's voice hissed in her ear:

"Not yet, my lady! Hold on!"

"What do you want?" gasped the girl, as she struggled to release herself.

"I want to get you out of here, thet's all," as he tried to force her through the open window.

Quaker Hi was a strong, wiry man, and seizing the girl in his arms, he lifted her up with the intention of putting her through.

Kitten resisted violently, but to no purpose.

"I'll scream, if you don't let me go," she panted.

"Do!" he answered, with a sneer, "and bring in your father. Then I'll tell him who is in that room. I'll tell him that Jack Neeley is—"

"Don't mention his name," interrupted Kitten, quickly.

"Oh! you're a little afraid, eh? Well, come along."

Another push, and he had dragged the girl through the window, holding her while he leaped through himself.

Then he seized her arm and dragged her away into the darkness, just as Peachblossom appeared at the window and sent his bowie-knife whizzing after him so close that it cut a long gash in Quaker Hi's sallow cheek.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A STROKE FROM THE SKY.

QUAKER HI did not stop as he felt the knife, like a hot iron, pass along his face. A scowl, that did not add to his beauty, corrugated his brows, and he gripped Kitten's wrist a little tighter, as he winced in pain.

He was determined to make a bold stroke now for the stake for which he was playing, and Kitten must be kept away from the young drummer at all hazards.

The girl was out of breath when, ten minutes later, they reached a clump of cedars that hid the commencement of one of the narrow foot-paths leading up the mountain.

Walking up the path a hundred yards or so, Hiram Placid turned suddenly to the left into what appeared at first to be a mere recess in the rocky wall, but which, on closer inspection, revealed the opening of a passage that led apparently into the very heart of the mountain.

Into this passage, Hiram Placid, stooping low, forced Kitten to enter.

"You've got pretty well acquainted with the mountains round Slippery Elm since you've been hyar," said Kitten, almost involuntarily.

"Shut up!" hissed Hiram.

"Where's your tall hat?" continued Kitten, with a silvery little laugh.

She knew that she was in danger, but her natural spirits could not be kept down.

"Verily, maiden, I'll smite thee to death if thou dost not hold thy peace," whispered Quaker Hi, dropping into his canting drawl again.

Hi gave a vicious tug at Kitten's hand, and the two, who had been passing along the passage during their short dialogue, found themselves once more in the open air.

It was a square space, on three sides walled in by the towering mountains, while the other looked down the gorge up which Kitten and Hiram had come, and gave a clear view of the clump of cedars at the foot of the path. Loose boulders lay around, behind which Quaker Hi hid himself, forcing Kitten into a sitting posture beside him, so that she also would be concealed in case any one was coming up the path.

A moment's glance assured him that they were not pursued, the moonlight making the scene almost as light as day.

"This is not a very good place to hide," said Kitten, with a little laugh. "Every man in Slippery Elm knows this little place. They call it Snap-Shot Gulch, 'cause one Indian once killed twenty others as they came up the road."

Kitten retailed this little bit of local history as coolly and unconcernedly as if she had been sitting in her father's bar-room, without any villainous hypocrite threatening her life at her side.

"Shut up!" said Hiram, fiercely.

"All right. Now, what are we going to do next?" said Kitten, utterly irrepressible.

Hiram took her by the hand and dragged her back into the mouth of the passage.

"Kitten!"

"Well?"

"Thee knows that I have already asked thee to marry me."

"Yes, and thee knows that I told thee I wouldn't do it," returned Kitten, mimicking his drawl.

Quaker Hi did not answer for a moment. He suddenly remembered that his face was covered with blood, and taking a handkerchief from around his neck, he tried to wipe the blood off.

"You don't look very pretty with all that blood on your face, anyhow," said Kitten.

"You ought to fix up a little when you propose to a lady."

There was a world of mischief in the girl's bright eyes, and Hiram Placid was almost beside himself as he seized her hand and wrung it with brutal force.

"Curse you! You shall marry me, or—"

"Or what?" asked Kitten, as she tried to release her hand.

"No matter what!" growled Hiram, throwing her hand away from him.

He stood, or rather crouched, in the entrance to the narrow passage, wiping his face and regarding the girl with evil eyes for at least a minute.

Then he took her wrist once more.

"What now, Hiram? What's the next move?" asked Kitten.

"I'm going to take you up to my place in the mountain—"

"Where I was before?"

"Yes."

"And what then?"

"I'll keep you there until you consent to marry me—"

"Peachblossom will—"

"I'll attend to Peachblossom," snarled Hiram, drawing a derringer from his pocket, and patting it significantly. "I'll attend to Peachblossom."

"But my father—"

"I have your father fixed. Don't you fear about him. He's all right."

"Say, Hiram, what makes you so anxious to marry me?" said Kitten, confidentially, as if a new idea had struck her.

"I love you."

"Rot! Don't talk that way. Give me a white man's reason."

"Ah, Kitten, thou art as lovely as Sarah of

old. Though thou dwellest in the tents of the Philistines, thou wouldst grace the temples of kings. Thou—"

"Oh, geewillikins! Ain't you comin'! Gosh! Hiram! Why don't you go to Denver and talk that stuff in a theater?"

Hiram clinched his teeth, and without another word dragged Kitten through the passage and on the road that led up the mountain.

The moon that had been lighting the mountain-side in a sheen of silvery softness now suddenly disappeared behind a heavy bank of clouds.

The path became black, and, unless one knew his way pretty well, was a trifle dangerous! Like most of the roads of the mountains, there was a precipice on one side and a sheer wall of rock, towering thousands of feet, on the other.

But Hiram seemed to be endowed with an instinct that would not let him go wrong, while Kitten, mountain-bred girl that she was, was as safe in the darkness as she would have been at mid-day, as far as the dangerous path was concerned.

Hiram and the girl pushed on in spite of the darkness, which seemed to be getting thicker every moment.

Their thoughts were widely different.

Hiram was considering whether he should murder the girl off-hand, and thus remove the great obstacle to his enjoyment of old Wallace's money. What matter if the will were discovered then? The girl would be dead, and Leonard Bolton was the next heir. He had established the fact satisfactorily to his own mind that Kitten was none other than Kate Vernon, the daughter of the Henri and Kate Vernon who had been driven out of the house of old Wallace nearly twenty years before.

Kitten did not suspect her own identity, he was sure. There were but two persons living who did, to the best of his belief—they were Peachblossom and himself.

As for Nat Grute, he may have had some general suspicions, but he did not know anything about the matter for certain. Kitten and Peachblossom were the only persons he had to fear.

He looked at Kitten furtively, as well as he could in the darkness, and thought how easy it would be to give her a sudden push and send her over the frightful precipice! She would not be able even to shriek.

But he could not do that! Let Kitten laugh as she would, he *did* love the girl, and he could not murder her—unless he were absolutely obliged to do so.

So he kept on marching up the path.

As for Kitten, she was thinking of a certain pair of blue eyes under dark lashes, and of a tender, manly voice that caused an answering heart-throb in her bosom every time she heard it.

Yes; down in her breast she felt that she loved the young drummer. Peachblossom was her ideal hero, and even now, when he had apparently deserted her, she had faith that he would save her from harm at the hands of the villain by her side.

"Hallo! What was that?" exclaimed Hiram, suddenly, as a big drop of water fell upon his hand.

Another drop splashed in his face, and then two or three more came down upon his hands and pattered upon the rocks at his side.

"Well, Hiram, that's just common old rain, that's what it is," said Kitten, cheerfully. "We're in a nice place for a storm, too, thanks to you. If it hadn't been for your cussedness, I'd ha' been safe in bed at home instead of prowling about the mountains."

"Maiden, thou art too talkative," said Hiram, mechanically, as he tried to pierce the gloom in search of some place of shelter.

"We must be a mile from my ranch," he muttered, "coming this roundabout way."

"We ain't as far as that from Slippery Elm Hotel!" interjected Kitten.

The rain was now coming down in earnest. Great round splashes of water, like liquid silver dollars, fell around and upon them, and they were soaked through and through.

Black darkness everywhere!

Suddenly a vivid streak of blue flame shot athwart the black sky, and showed for a second or two the jagged rocks, the loosening boulders and the fearful pit at the side of the man and girl.

Lightning! Swift, keen, death-bearing!

Involuntarily both Hiram and the girl covered their eyes as the heavenly falcion cut the dark pall in twain and seemed to laugh with demoniac fury as it lost itself in the chasm at their feet.

A peal of thunder that shook the mountain to its center followed, and the storm was upon them with a violence known only to the West, where Nature holds its own in majestic grandeur.

Flash after flash of forked lightning tore down the canyon; peal after peal of deafening thunder reverberated through the mountain range, while the rain came down in great sheets, beating Hiram and the girl to the earth and forcing them to cling to the rocky wall like hunted animals.

Neither spoke! They could not have heard each other's voices if they had. But they had no disposition to talk. They were completely awe-stricken by the elements. They realized to the fullest extent what puny creatures human beings are in the face of Nature's uncontrolled anger.

Hiram Placid had never released the wrist of Kitten, but he was holding it only because he had not thought of letting it go.

A blinding flash, accompanied with a hissing sound, as if a thousand devils were muttering curses, coursed down the gulch.

Even as Kitten involuntarily lowered her head, an unearthly shriek burst from the lips of her companion, sounding with weird distinctness high above the roar of the storm, and Hiram Placid threw himself flat upon his back.

The flash had struck him!

Another gleam of blue-white lightning quivered over the path even while the roll of thunder from the previous flash deafened the young girl.

In the infernal light Hiram Placid's face, white and distorted, the tongue gibbering unmeaning sounds, met her gaze, and with a wild cry of terror, she drew back and covered her eyes with her hand.

Quaker Hi was a raving maniac!

CHAPTER XXIX.

WHAT PEACHBLOSSOM FOUND IN THE CELLAR.

WHEN Peachblossom threw his knife at Hiram he did it without any more definite intention than to stop the abduction of Kitten.

As we know, his aim was a fairly good one, and it was only a slight swerving on the part of Hiram that saved him from being cut through the brain.

When he saw that he had failed to stop Hiram, the young drummer drew his revolver from inside his shirt, and pointed it for an instant at the flying scoundrel.

"No, no," he muttered, as he put up his weapon. "I cannot afford to have the fellows from the bar-room come out here now. I will get even with that lantern-jawed brute some time. But I am not going to let him take that girl, anyhow."

He had already leaped through the window, and started in pursuit of Hiram Placid when he ran plump into the arms of a big man who came around the corner of the house at that instant.

"Wal, now, Jack Neeley, what are you doin' hyar?" drawled Dan Walker, for he it was. "Why ain't yer in ther house 'tendin' to that business what yer said yer wanted the gal to help yer out in? Durn my skin ef I ever see'd sich a feller!"

Peachblossom tried to push Dan to one side, as he pointed to where Hiram Placid and Kitten were just disappearing behind the clump of cedars.

"Don't yer see that he's got that girl again, and that it means murder?" said the young drummer, impatiently.

It was the first time that Dan Walker had ever seen this usually cool and self-possessed young man, at all excited, and he actually whistled in the extremity of his surprise.

"Wal, wal, youngster, durn me ef you ain't c'lar off yer head! Kitten's all right. You can trust her to take care of herself. Just let her go now. We'll bring her back's soon ez we want her. Thar ain't any place ez that thar Quaker Hi can take her only up to his ranch on t'her mountains, an' we can smoke him 'out o' that at any moment. Come into ther house an' look through them papers. Thet's what you hev ter do."

As he spoke Dan seized Peachblossom by the shoulder and pushed him back toward the window.

For a moment the young drummer seemed disposed to rebel, but sober second thought convinced him that the big miner was right, and he yielded to the inevitable.

Not that he intended to let Quaker Hi have his own way with Kitten for long. As soon as certain business looking toward the restoration of Kitten to her rights was put in train, the young drummer would follow Hiram, even to the end of the world, expose his true character and release the girl from his villainous clutches.

"Now, Jack Neeley, you're terrible drunk, ef any one happens to come inter this hyar room, mind," said Dan Walker, to the drummer, as the two having re-entered the house through the window, had gained Peachblossom's bedroom and shut themselves in.

"I understand," replied Peachblossom, briefly.

Dan Walker examined the door fastening, saw that it was secure, and stood with his back to it ready to keep out all intruders.

"Get to work now, youngster!" he said.

Peachblossom looked carefully around the room, and going to the window, which was strongly shuttered, examined it to see that it couldn't be opened from the outside. It was secured with a stout wooden bar, that swung on a pivot on one shutter, and when placed horizontally, held both firmly in place.

"That appears to be all right," said the drummer, turning away from the window.

"No chinks, eh?" observed Dan.

"I'm thinking about that," returned Peachblossom, who was pulling a quilt from the bed. "I do not intend to take any chances."

There were several nails in the wooden walls of the room, apparently for clothes-pegs. Fortunately two nails were driven in just over the window. On these Peachblossom hung his quilt so that it completely covered the shutters.

"There!" he said. "I don't think the chinks, if there are any, will help any one outside now."

There was a great deal of noise in the bar-room adjoining. It was getting pretty late, and the guests of Mr. Nat Grute were disposed to be obstreperous as the evening wore on and their host's whisky exerted its usual effect.

Dan Walker had imbibed a fair share of it himself, but he was so used to it that it did not seem to trouble him, especially when he had some interesting business on hand, as was the case now.

"Them thar fellers are all right," he said. "Let 'em squirm an' enjy themselves, ez long ez they don't try ter come in hyar. Now that snake, Quaker Hi, has got out, I ain't 'fraid of any disturbance."

"Unless Grute or his boy should—"

"If Nat Grute or that imp of brimstone, Pudge, tries to get in hyar, I'll skin 'em both alive. And," he added reflectively, "they'd both look durned or'nary ef they was skun."

During the foregoing dialogue, Peachblossom had not been wasting time.

He had turned up the carpet in the corner of the room and exposed to view the trap referred to in an earlier chapter.

The trap had been closed, since it was not "set" for the benefit of any unlucky guest, but Peachblossom, seizing its iron ring, had pulled it open with one vigorous wrench.

"Gosh! Thet's er durned cold wind that comes out of thet hole," said Dan Walker, with a little shiver. "Good place to keep oysters like we used ter git in the East when I was thar five years ago."

"Keep careful watch, Dan," was Peachblossom's only reply, as he prepared to go down the trap.

It was a deep hole, and there seemed to be no very safe way of getting into it. But Peachblossom was fertile in resources, and had already hit upon a plan for descending without much trouble.

The carpet that generally covered the trap was a good deal larger than the space required, and when the trap was opened, could be hung down in the hole some four feet. It was firmly fastened to the floor, and would easily bear the weight of a man.

Peachblossom had taken in all these points at a glance, and, before Dan Walker knew exactly what he was doing, had swung himself into the hole by the carpet, and was out of sight.

"Hello, down thar," said Dan, trying to peer into the gloom which had completely absorbed the young drummer.

"Hush! Don't make a noise," answered the voice of Peachblossom, from below. "This place extends under the bar-room. I can see the lights shining through chinks in the floor at the front there."

"Well, have you found the chest yet?"

There was no answer to this question, but Dan saw a bull's-eye lantern flashing in the darkness, and he knew that the young drummer was searching for it intelligently and with fair hopes of success.

Peachblossom had taken a lantern down with him, and had moreover a good idea where the chest was to which Dan had referred. Therefore he turned his back to the place where, as he had told Dan, he could see the light shining through the chinks, and groped his way carefully in the other direction.

He did not know how far the cellar extended, but supposed it went only as far as the back wall of the house.

He soon found that he was mistaken. The subterranean room had been cut through the solid rock a long way beyond the wall line.

As he groped his way on and on, sometimes in black darkness, and sometimes along a little lane of light from the lantern, he wondered where the chest that contained, he knew, most important papers, had been hidden.

It might be that it had been concealed in some secret recess in this mysterious cellar, and that he would not be able to find it at all.

That it contained old Wallace's latest will which would give the daughter of Henri and Kate Vernon the money that had for so long been enjoyed by Leonard Bolton, he knew. He had not come all the way from Chicago without being well informed on every point connected with his search, and he felt now that he had almost reached the goal upon which he had staked his professional reputation, and in which he felt a strange interest that he could hardly account for. He had gathered enough information to assure him that Kitten was the missing heiress, and he had a rather strong suspicion (that was, however, at present, only suspicion,) that Quaker Hi and Leonard Bolton were one and the same person.

If Kitten had not been spirited off by Hiram, she could have led him directly to the spot where the chest was concealed in the cellar, and he would have had but little trouble.

"Never mind," he soliloquized, "I'll find it somehow, and then, Mr. Hiram Placid, I'll meet you, and make you very sick."

He had walked on for some time, and was according to his reckoning several hundred feet from the trap by which he had descended from the bedroom. The cellar seemed to be almost empty, a few bottles and barrels being scattered here and there, and but little else as far as he could tell.

"Of course being in pitch darkness save for the light of his lantern, he could not tell whether there might be other things in the distance.

Suddenly he found himself in a narrow passage, running off from the main cellar. The walls touched his elbows on each side, when he allowed them to move from his side, and he reckoned that the corridor was not more than three feet wide.

"It must be a narrow chest if it has been taken through this place, but I am following the directions that I have, and I guess it will take me through all right."

He stopped and fumbling inside the fine flannel shirt that he wore inside the rough garments that he had put on to sustain the character of Jack Neeley, drew from an inner pocket a leather pocketbook.

Placing his lantern on the damp ground, he knelt down by it and opened the pocketbook in its light.

He drew from it a paper on which was stretched a map, or diagram.

It was a picture of the cellar in which he stood.

"Yes," said Peachblossom to himself. "This is right. It reads, 'Turn your back to the bar-room and follow the beaten path to its very end.' Now, this is the beaten path for it was all rough and soft earth on each side until I reached this corridor. Let me see what else it says. He read: 'You will get to a place where the cellar gets much narrower, but follow the path.'"

Peachblossom replaced the paper in his pocketbook and put the latter in his inside pocket, as he picked up his lantern and went on with renewed satisfaction.

The corridor ended as suddenly as it had begun, and he found himself in another large cellar. At least, he thought from the way his footsteps echoed on the hard path, that it was large, though he could not see.

A few more steps, and then--

"Who's that?" he demanded fiercely, as his revolver leaped from his belt, and he stood ready to meet an unseen and unexpected foe.

His lantern had dropped from his hand, and he dared not search for it now, in the face of a mysterious and wholly unlooked-for danger.

He was not alone in the cellar!

"Who's that?" he demanded again. "Open your mouth, or I'll never give you another chance."

No answer.

What was it that had caused this hostile demonstration on the part of the drummer?

There was not a sound save his own voice and footsteps to be heard, and no one had touched him! Yet he stood there, in an attitude of defiance, revolver in hand and finger on trigger, apparently waiting to be attacked.

The explanation was a simple one, after all.

Walking along, with his bull's-eye lantern throwing its shaft of light ahead of him, it had all at once brought into view the form of a man crouched down behind a little hillock of stones, apparently ready to fire at the intruder as soon as he came near enough to afford a certain mark.

The man was on his hands and knees, his face resting on the stones, and a big sombrero pulled low over his brows.

Peachblossom had but a momentary glimpse of him, but it was sufficient to show him that the stranger was in a menacing posture that might mean death to the young drummer in a second.

Peachblossom had had an adventurous life, and was generally prompt to act, but in this case he found himself in a downright quandary.

Should he fire?

Were he to do so, he would bring Nat Grute and the whole party of rascals from the bar-room about his ears.

And yet, if he did not do something, this fellow, crouching down here, might send a bullet or a Bowie through his heart in the dark while he was debating with himself.

Peachblossom soon made up his mind.

Dropping quietly to his knees, he moved rapidly but noiselessly to one side, so that his foe, whoever he might be, would not know in which direction to charge upon him in the darkness.

Not a sound came from the stranger while Peachblossom executed this maneuver. But the young drummer had had enough experience to know that an unseen foe is always the more dangerous for being quiet.

Something touched Peachblossom's hand on the ground as he crawled along. It was his lantern, still alight.

The young drummer took the lantern in his left hand, and holding his revolver ready for instant action in his right, suddenly turned a shaft of light full in the face of the crouching stranger.

One glance, and Peachblossom rushed forward with a cry of surprise.

The man crouching down was bleeding and senseless, and as the young drummer got a full view of his face, he at once recognized the features of Red Bill!

CHAPTER XXX.

RETRIBUTION.

"BILL," said Peachblossom, placing his hand on Red Bill's shoulder and shaking him slightly. Red Bill groaned.

"Ah, that's good. Let's see what's the matter with you. Then I should like to find out how you got into this place," muttered Peachblossom.

His experience told him that Red Bill was not much hurt. A wound on the center of his forehead, from which the blood was running down, was not such as would be made by a pistol-shot or a knife-blade, and while it had been sufficient to stun the sufferer, was not dangerous.

Already Red Bill was beginning to revive.

"Feel—feel—in—the inside—of—my shirt—for flask," muttered Bill, feebly.

Peachblossom did as he requested and brought forth a small flask of whisky.

A pull at this, and Red Bill braced up wonderfully. He sat up and stared at the lantern.

"How did you get here, Bill?"

Red Bill took the lantern from Peachblossom's hand and turned it on the drummer's face.

"Governor, is that you, hyar?"

"I might ask you whether this is you, here," returned the drummer, coolly.

"That's so. Wal, I come down without knowing whar I wuz goin'," said Red Bill. "I guess I sprung this ranch kinder unexpectedly. Thar is a openin' just above thar that I found by accident, an' thought I'd jist come through an' find out what the place wuz."

"Well?"

"Wal, I did find it. The entrance was in a cave that is generally hidden, but the stones over the hole got loosened by the rain, an' I strolled in. Then I fell over this hyar heap of stones, an' I guess I struck my head ag'in' the corner of this hyar iron chest, or whatever it is."

"Chest? Where?" interrupted Peachblossom, eagerly.

"Why, hyar it is, right at my elber."

Peachblossom turned the light toward the spot indicated by Red Bill, and saw there was indeed a good-sized iron-bound trunk, which was, no doubt, the chest for which he had been searching.

"Eureka!" he ejaculated, involuntarily.

"What's thet thar word ag'in?" asked Red Bill, in mystified tones.

"Never mind about the word, as long as I've found the chest. Bill, you've got to help me."

"Cert."

"How's your head? Do you feel all right?"

"A little bit dizzy. But it will soon pass away, I guess. I'm pretty tough. That is, I mean, my constitution's tough."

"Oh!" said Peachblossom. "Well, open that trunk, quick. I'll hold the light."

"Do yer know thet thar trunk is pretty strong, an' that I haven't got nothin' to break it open with?" said Red Bill.

"That is so. Well, I have a key."

Peachblossom brought a rusty old key from some secret receptacle in his clothing, and holding the lantern so that it lighted up the keyhole, put in the key, and, with some difficulty, opened it.

He and Red Bill both raised the lid, and then the latter made a little exclamation of disappointment.

There was nothing in the trunk but a small bundle of papers tied with red tape, in one corner of the large box.

Red Bill had expected to see something that, in his opinion, would be worth taking. These old papers, hidden in the cellar of Nat Grute's Slippery Elm Hotel, surely could be of no use to this bright young drummer from Chicago.

Peachblossom hid the bundle of papers in his shirt, and then, taking Red Bill by the hand, made a movement toward retracing his steps.

"Why not go out the way I came in?" said Red Bill. "I guess I can find the way to it. It is not far from hyar, governor."

"No; I have some one waiting for me at the other end, Bill. Besides, I have business in the Slippery Elm Hotel that I want to get finished to-night."

"All right: whatever you say, goes with Red Bill. I'm with yer, through 'bick and thin," was Red Bill's rejoinder, as still with his hand in that of Peachblossom he followed him through the narrow passage and into the cellar proper of Slippery Elm Hotel.

It did not take them very long to get back to

the trap, at which Dan Walker was patiently waiting.

"Hello, Dan!" whispered Peachblossom.

"Hallo yerself!" was Dan's reply. "Whar in thunderation hev yer been? I hed er durned good notion to come after yer. I would ha' done it only I thought p'raps Nat Grute or thet little imp, Fudge, might come er prowlin' around. An' ef they did—well, they'd ha' hed the worst headache they ever see in all their lives."

"Help me out of this, Dan," said Peachblossom. "I can't quite reach the end of that carpet."

"Git on a bar'l, then. Thar's plenty of them down thar," replied Dan.

"You're right!"

Red Bill, who had now completely recovered from his wound in the head, helped to roll a barrel under the hole, and in another minute he and Peachblossom were both standing in the bedroom by the side of Dan Walker.

"Well, durn my skin!" said the latter. "Whar in thunderation did you come from, Red Bill? Is that the treasure you wur lookin' fer down thar, Peachblossom? Seems to me thet you mought have found somethin' prettier."

Red Bill evidently did not appreciate this left-handed compliment, but he thought it wiser not to resent it. He had had experience with Dan Walker before.

"Shut down the trap, Dan," said Peachblossom, briefly.

"Shut down thar trap thar," repeated Dan Walker to Red Bill.

Red Bill hesitated, but only for a second. Then he closed the trap and pulled the carpet over it.

In the meantime Peachblossom was taking off his outer garments, leaving him in the fine undershirt that he wore beneath the coarser clothing of Jack Neeley. He had already removed the sluggers, showing his own handsome face, but a great deal dirtier than usual.

"Red Bill," he said, "I want you to find my knife. I threw it after a skulking coyote, and I guess it is somewhere under that clump of pines at the back of the house."

"Get it in the morning. It's past twelve o'clock now, and it won't be long to wait till daylight," suggested Dan.

"I want it now," said Peachblossom, quietly, but determinedly.

"All right. Everything goes, pard," said Dan, with an air of resignation.

He opened the door leading into the kitchen and looked cautiously around. It was quite empty.

The noise continued—the bar-room assuring him that the drinking and carousing there was at full height.

Peachblossom slipped through into the kitchen, opened the window, and gave Red Bill directions as to the probable spot in which he would find the knife.

Then, while Red Bill was searching among the pines in the distance, the young drummer went back to the bedroom, and opening his valise, which had not been disturbed by Nat Grute or his hopeful son since he last left the hotel, took out a razor and shaving-brush, and coolly began to shave, with the aid of a tin bowl of water, and a cake of the hard soap before referred to.

Dan Walker looked at him in utter surprise, not unmixed with indignation.

"What in the name of the great hot springs are yer a-doin' now? Durn my skin ef this hyar ain't er nice time ter be er shavin' yerself! Who do yer expect ter mash around Slippery Elm, I'd like to know? An' hyar am I er achin' to know what yer found down in thet thar cellar. Yer haven't told me yet how yer come across Red Bill down thar yet, an' that's one of the most puzzlin' things ez I ever heerd tell of."

"All in good time, Dan. Don't worry yourself," returned Peachblossom, cheerfully, as, having lathered his chin freely, he shaved himself with a few rapid but certain strokes.

The shaving concluded, he washed his face and neck carefully, and arranged his hair and blonde mustache. Then he produced his regular clothing from another valise—Prince Albert coat, white collar, necktie, and fashionable hat included—and proceeded calmly to array himself in them.

In fifteen minutes the drunken Irish miner, Jack Neeley, had been completely transformed into Peachblossom, the handsome young drummer, representing the lace firm of Valens & Schwab, of Chicago, as well as a detective agency that had sent him West on an important mission.

"Now, I feel like myself again," he said, at last, as he looked in a piece of broken looking-glass with the sputtering candle.

"Here's your knife," put in Red Bill, as he came into the room from the kitchen.

Peachblossom put the Bowie-knife, which had already been carefully wiped by Red Bill, into an inside pocket, and put his two six-shooters down the collar of his coat, where, it will be remembered, he preferred to keep them.

"Fasten that door, Dan."

"All right," said Dan Walker, as he secured the door leading to the kitchen.

Peachblossom drew forth the bundle of papers that he had found in the cellar, and said, looking at Dan Walker:

"I take possession of these papers, by virtue of a warrant issued to me by the proper authorities in Denver. You and Red Bill can be witnesses of my opening them."

Both Dan and Red Bill agreed to be witnesses. They were full of curiosity, and were only too glad to be afforded an opportunity of seeing what was in the package.

"Old Wallace's will, sure," said Peachblossom, unable to repress his exultation, as he examined the first paper.

The nature of its contents is already known to the reader, and need not be repeated.

"Now, let me see what else Mr. Grute has kept so carefully hidden away," said the young drummer as he ran hastily through the papers. "Ah, here it is. A full confession written by Mrs. Nat Grute, now deceased, to the effect that the child, Kate Vernon, daughter of Henri, and Kate Vernon was placed in her charge before the mother died; that she expected Old Wallace would leave her his fortune, and that she therefore determined to keep her out of sight until she could make good terms either with the girl herself in the future or with Old Wallace, if he should institute a search for her before his death."

Red Bill had been listening most intently as Peachblossom read this, seeming to be even more interested than was Dan Walker.

"Read that again," said Red Bill, when Peachblossom had concluded, and was turning the paper over and over in his hands. "Ain't thar any witnesses to it? The old woman's word wouldn't count ef thar warn't anything ter back it up."

"Yes, here are two witnesses—William Wilkins and the Justice of the Peace of the 26th precinct, Chicago, Thomas Lasalle. Now, the next thing will be to find the witnesses. I suppose there won't be very much trouble to get hold of the justice, Lasalle, in Chicago. As for William Wilkins, the other witness—"

"He is right hyar," said Red Bill, excitedly, as he smote himself on the chest. "Right hyar! I wuz the man ez witnessed that paper. I can sw'ar ter it, but I never knew what wuz in it. Old 'Squire Lasalle read it ter me, of course, but I didn't know nothin' about it. I was purty full at the time, an' I never thought no more 'bout it, but I can sw'ar to ther paper with that funny shaped blot of red ink on ther corner and the black smudge of ink in ther middle. I can sw'ar ter it, I tell yer, 'Squire.'"

"Don't make so much noise," put in Dan.

"Well, Bill, if you are William Wilkins, you will be given a chance to swear to it in Chicago—"

"I don't want ter go ter Chicago," interrupted Red Bill hastily. "It wouldn't be healthy for me."

"I'll fix that for you," said the drummer. "This young girl must get her rights in spite of everything."

"That's so," said Dan Walker, sententiously. "Well, now, Dan, are you willing to go with me to find her? It is evident that Kate Vernon, hitherto known as Kitten, is an heiress, and it is not right that she should be kept in ignorance of her real position longer than is necessary."

At this moment there was a knock at the door from the bar-room.

Peachblossom hastily pushed Red Bill into a corner behind the door, and retreated to the same place himself, as Dan opened the door and faced Nat Grute.

"What are yer doin' in here, Dan? Won't you come out an' hev a drink?" asked Nat, trying to squeeze past the big miner, so as to get a glimpse of the interior of the room.

Dan Walker was determined that the landlord of the Slippery Elm Hotel should not see the room, so he pushed him back as he answered.

"Oh, I don't want no drink just now. My pard, Jack Neeley, is a-sleepin' quietly thar, and I'm just lettin' him be for the present."

Nat Grute found that he could not push past Dan Walker, and turned toward the bar-room again, when he started back with an expression of horror upon his face such as Dan had never seen before.

"Look," he whispered, huskily. "Look! What is that?" pointing toward the door of the hotel that led into the street.

It was indeed a weird spectacle that met the gaze of Nat Grute and Dan Walker, and that seemed to sober up the dozen miners who had been drinking the fearful Slippery Elm Hotel whisky since early evening.

A man, with a cadaverous face and glassy eyes, with a red streak of blood on one cheek, while the other was blackened and drawn out of shape, as if seared with a red-hot iron, stood in the doorway.

He chuckled idiotically, and as he did so his mouth was drawn to one side by the burned muscles of his cheek.

He walked straight into the bar-room, and stopped in the middle, with his eyes fixed upon Nat Grute.

The man was Quaker Hi, or Leonard Bolton as he should properly be called.

He did not utter a sound for a minute, and then he began to talk very fast.

"It is the truth. My name is Leonard Bolton. I had the old man's money for a while, and—ha! ha! ha!—I made it fly. Then that other will—the girl—I must marry her—or—kill her! Yes; where is it? The will! The will!"

He made a sudden dart toward Nat Grute, who sprang nimbly aside.

Leonard Bolton dashed through the door, and seizing the candle that was stuck in a bottle on the small table, held it aloft as he looked behind the door.

The light fell full on the calm, handsome face of Peachblossom, and with a wild shriek, Leonard Bolton fell dead at the feet of the young drummer.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN UNEXPECTED WITNESS.

"DEAD as last year's blizzard," was Dan Walker's comment, as he seized the remains of Leonard Bolton and dragged them out into the bar-room.

He did not feel disposed to let Peachblossom be seen by Grute until the former had expressed his willingness to be introduced to the urbane landlord of the Slippery Elm Hotel, and such an unimportant incident as the death of Quaker Hi did not affect him enough to make him forget the interests of Peachblossom.

The crowd in the bar-room were sobered by this tragic end to the career of Quaker Hi. Had he died by a pistol-shot or a knife-stab, it would not have troubled them at all. But this visitation, from a source about which they knew nothing, awed them.

They took up the body and laid it on the table ready for the coroner, with a handkerchief over its face, and stood around it in respectful silence.

Dan Walker came out of the room, where Peachblossom and Red Bill still remained, and stepped up to the body.

"Whar's ther coroner? I thought I saw him in hyar a little while ago."

"That's a fact. So did I," asserted another miner, with a remarkably-large red nose, as he looked around the room.

"Who's that feller asleep over thar?" asked Dan, pointing to a stout man with his hat pulled over his eyes, who was snoring away contentedly in a gloomy corner.

"Thet's him! Thet's ther feller!" cried half a dozen voices.

"Well, bring him forrad, and let's hear what he has ter say 'bout this hyar case. A coroner ought ter know all 'bout it, ef any one can," suggested Dan.

Pudge, in his innocent way, had stolen softly over to the sleeper as soon as attention was called to him, and now stuck a good-sized pin into his leg with hearty good-will.

"Ouch! Ow! What in thunder—" howled the stout man, leaping from his seat and glaring around him.

Pudge prudently kept out of the way, and the stout man, arranging his hat on the back of his head, walked toward the table with unsteady steps and lifted the handkerchief from Leonard Bolton's dead face.

"Hello! (hic!) What's all this (hic!) hyar? I'm the coroner, an' (hic!) I want ther (hic!) witnesses to come forrad and be (hic!) sworn."

"Wal, coroner—" commenced Dan Walker.

"Silence!" yelled the coroner, fiercely. Then, in a dignified whisper, he repeated: "Silence!"

"All right, coroner," said Dan, humbly.

"Now, who knows (hic!) anything about (hic!) this hyar (hic!) case?"

"I do," said Nat Grute, in his surly way.

"You do, eh, Grute? (hic!) Well, be sworn."

The oath was administered, and then Grute proceeded to tell, in a succinct and apparently truthful way, that he knew Hiram Placid, commonly called Quaker Hi, had been murdered.

"How do yer know (hic!) that ther de-deceased has (hic!) been murdered?" asked the coroner, tapping the face of the corpse with the ends of his fingers to emphasize his question.

"Wal, er man couldn't die without being killed, could he?"

This was a piece of Slippery Elm philosophy, that evidently made a strong impression upon the coroner and his audience, six of whom, by the way, he had, with some difficulty, sworn in as a jury.

"Thet's so," said the coroner. "A man couldn't (hic!) die 'thout he wuz killed."

The jury shook their heads solemnly, as much as to say that there was no disputing this obvious fact.

"Well, now ther next (hic!) question is, who (hic!) killed him?"

"He was in this room a few hours ago. Then he went out to go to his ranch up the mountain with a package of papers that belonged to me thet I lent him to 'zamine fer me."

"Whar are them (hic!) papers?"

"In his pocket, 'thout some skunk has stolen them."

"Wal, we'll go through his his (hic!) pockets, an' see!" said the coroner.

He fumbled at the clothes of Leonard Bolton,

but his hand was unsteady, and he made but small progress.

"I'll find 'em fer yer, coroner," volunteered Nat Grute.

"All right! Go ahead!" said the coroner.

Grute dexterously ran his hands into the coarse shirt worn by Leonard Bolton and soon brought forth a pocketbook well filled with papers.

"These are your (hic!)—papers, you say?"

"Yes!"

"Can you sw'ar ter it?"

"Yes."

"All right. Do you (hic!) know anybody who wuz an enemy of (hic!) deceased?"

"Yes."

"What wuz his (hic!) name?"

"There wuz two of 'em!"

"Two, eh? (hic!) Tell the court who they (hic!) wuz."

"Red Bill and that thar stranger that's been skulking around Slippery Elm—a feller what they calls Peachblossom."

"Liar!" rung out a clear voice, as the door of the bedroom burst open, and the young drummer, cool as a cucumber, and faultlessly dressed, stepped through the doorway.

Nat Grute's pistol was out in a second, but not before the drummer had covered him with his dainty, but dangerous six-shooter.

"Drop that popgun of yours, Mr. Grute, or I shall be under the disagreeable necessity of shooting off the top of your head," said Peachblossom, in his soft tones.

Nat Grute surlily replaced his pistol in his belt, but Peachblossom kept his weapon in his hand, as the coroner, with wide-open eyes, asked him in a dignified way that was very funny, "What in thunder he was (hic!) doing?"

"That's ther murderer! I have proof that he killed poor Hiram Placid. I kin prove it!" screamed Nat Grute, in uncontrollable fury, as he turned his one eye malevolently upon the imperturbable young drummer.

"What hev you to (hic!) say?" said the coroner looking at Peachblossom. "An' whar in (hic!) thunder did you come from (hic!) anyhow?"

"He's a burglar—that's what he is," howled Nat Grute, fairly beside himself, as he gnashed his teeth in impotent rage.

Still Peachblossom only smiled, as he looked carelessly from the raging Grute to the drunken coroner.

"That room is mine while I pay rent for it. I engaged it two days ago. As to your question, what have I to say, that man lies in his teeth when he charges me with being in any way concerned in the death of Hiram Placid, alias Quaker Hi, alias Leonard Bolton."

"Leonard Bolton!" repeated two or three of the miners, in surprise.

They could not understand how this stranger knew more about Hiram Placid than they, who had been calling him Quaker Hi for months past without troubling themselves about any other name he might possess.

It was not etiquette at Slippery Elm to inquire what names had been borne by its citizens in the East.

"Wal, give me my property, coroner," said Nat Grute, holding out his hand for the pocketbook that had been taken from Quaker Hi's pocket. "I've told all I know about ther murder, an' ef yer don't want ter believe me I ain't got nothin' more ter say."

"You'll hev ter prove (hic!) thet ther pocketbook is yours, Nat," said the coroner. "The law don't 'low me ter (hic!) give up things permis-cu-cu-ous, don't yer see?"

"Wal, I'd like ter hev my property," grumbled Nat.

"That's right, dad! Stick up fer yer rights! I will back yer!" cried Pudge, in his shrill falsetto, who, as usual, wanted to stir up a row if it was possible, without caring who was involved in it.

Nat seized a bottle and hurled it at his hopeful son, with force enough to have smashed his skull if it had hit him.

"Shut up, will yer?" he growled.

"Those papers are mine," interposed Peachblossom, quietly.

"Yours?" said the coroner, with drunken gravity.

"Yes, sir. They were stolen from me by this man Grute and the deceased, in a ranch in the mountains, which I believe to have been occupied and owned by this man Leonard Bolton—or Hiram Placid, as he is known in Slippery Elm."

"It's—it's a durned lie!" sputtered Nat Grute.

"It's the truth," said Peachblossom, quietly.

"Wal, go on," said the coroner.

"I was made a prisoner by Hiram Placid and Nat Grute—"

"It's a lie!" howled Grute. "Coroner, this man—this Eastern thief—had stolen my daughter. I went ter hunt him up, an' we had a tussle, as any father would—"

"You're a good father, too!" put in Pudge.

"Silence in (hic!) court!" said the coroner.

"My girl is somewhar in ther mountains now—I don't know whar—an' I charge this man with abductin' her—"

"We can't consider that now," interrupted the coroner. "I'm (hic!) sheriff of the county, ez well ez coroner, an' I'll listen ter ther (hic!) evidence in thet case arter a while (hic!). But I want ter find out (hic!) first of all, how (hic!) this hyar man, Hiram Placid, came ter his (hic!) death."

"Wal, coroner," said Nat Grute, "how about that pocketbook of mine?"

"Of mine," said Peachblossom.

"I don't care er durn who it belongs ter," said the coroner, impatiently. "How did this hyar (hic!) dead body come to his (hic!) death?"

"Look at his face," suggested Grute. "Thar's the mark of er bowie-knife on one cheek—"

"Kin you swar that you didn't (hic!) inflict this hyar (hic!) wound on ther (hic!) deceased?" asked the coroner, turning to Peachblossom.

"I have every reason to suppose that I did do it," said Peachblossom, quietly.

"There, boys, listen ter that! He says he did it. I knew he did!" shrieked Nat Grute.

The miners crowded around the young drummer threateningly, but he placed his back against the bar, and drew his other revolver, so that he had one in each hand.

"Keep back, boys! Don't come too near! I shall not run away, but I don't allow liberties to be taken with me," said Peachblossom, airily.

"Down with him!" yelled Grute, stepping toward Peachblossom, and putting his hand to his pistol-belt as he did so.

"Take your hand away, quick!" cried the young drummer, and Nat Grute obeyed with alacrity.

"Order in (hic!) court!" commanded the coroner. "I'll tend to the prisoner!"

The miners looked toward the coroner, but still kept a wary eye on the well-dressed Peachblossom.

"Now, gentlemen, the facts of ther (hic!) case seem ter be about like (hic!) this hyar: Hyar's a (hic!) gentleman found dead in er (hic!) room. From that thar room comes er stranger, (hic!) Peach—Peach—blossom, who is (hic!) charged with ther murder of ther (hic!) deceased. Now, gentlemen, I believe that this hyar (hic!) Peach—Peach—blossom, did (hic!) kill ther deceased, an' I expect (hic!) you will bring him in guilty. How (hic!) say you, gentlemen of the (hic!) jury, is the prisoner at ther bar (hic!) bar (hic!) Thet's funny, boys, do yer (hic!) notice that? I said the prisoner at ther (hic!) bar, an'—an' he is standin' at ther (hic!) bar. So yer see he is at ther (hic!) bar. Is he guilty or not (hic!) guilty?"

"Guilty! Guilty!" said the six men of the jury unhesitatingly.

"Good! Now, (hic!) Mr. Peach—Peach—blossom, I guess you will hev ter be (hic!) placed under arrest to (hic!) await your trial for (hic!) murder!"

Peachblossom still stood gently smiling, leaning against the bar, with his two silver-mounted pistols in his hands, ready for instant action.

"So that is the verdict, eh, coroner?" he said.

"That air ther (hic!) verdict ez you heard."

"Suppose I prove that I am not guilty?"

"Not guilty?"

"Yes."

"I don't see (hic!) how you can do that now."

"Why not?"

"Wal, the jury hev (hic!) found you guilty an' I don't see how I can (hic!) go back of the records. It's a nice (hic!) pint of law—thet thar is," said the coroner, gravely.

"But I am entitled to have it considered if I can prove my innocence."

"Innecence, eh?" said Grute. "Yes, you are an innercent duck, you are."

"Silence in (hic!) court," commanded the coroner.

"Well, why don't yer prove yer innercence?" asked Grute, who still stood leaning carelessly against the bar.

"Whar's yer (hic!) witnesses?"

"There is one," and the drummer pointed to Dan Walker, who had been so overcome by the majesty of the law, as illustrated in the person of the coroner, that he had had nothing to say for the last few moments.

"Yes, here is one, sure as ye'r born!" acquiesced Dan. "I am ther feller ez will stand by this hyar youngster ter ther end, fer he's proved himself cl'ar grit."

As Dan spoke, he broke through the crowd of miners, and taking his stand by the side of Peachblossom, drew his two pistols and looked defiance at every one in turn.

"Hello! What's all this (hic!)? Durned ef I won't issue a habbus corpus (hic!) an' hev yer both made inter corpses fer (hic!) derfyn' ther law!" spluttered the coroner, in a tremendously flushed state of indignation.

"Thet's what!" echoed Grute.

"Hooray! Hyar's a time we're havin', dad!" howled Pudge.

"Silence in court!" from the coroner.

Peachblossom had both hands full with his pistols, so he simply touched his elbow to that of Dan Walker in token of thanks.

Dan understood him, and returned the pressure.

All this had not taken more than a few seconds.

Then there was another commotion as Red Bill dashed out of the bedroom, and pushing the crowd asunder, planted himself on the other side of Peachblossom, with a pistol in his right hand and a bowie-knife in his left.

"Hyar's one more ez will stand by ther drummer to the end," cried Red Bill.

The coroner's offended dignity was something terrible to witness.

"Durn me ef I didn't (hic!) think they'd hung you a (hic!) couple of days ago," he managed to gasp.

"No, but we will hang him at sunrise, sure ez his name is Red Bill," cried Nat Grute, in a transport of fury.

"Bully fer you, dad!" shouted Pudge, gleefully.

"Coroner, will you listen to me?" asked Peachblossom, quietly, as soon as he could make himself heard.

The coroner waved his hand in a gracious manner as a sign that the drummer might speak.

"That I had nothing to do with the death of that man I can prove by these two witnesses—Dan Walker and Red Bill."

"Dan Walker don't (hic!) know anythin' about it, an' his (hic!) testimony is ruled out. As fer Red (hic!) Bill, he was (hic!) hung two days (hic!) ago, for robbing Kid Hawkins's ranch, an' a (hic!) man what's hanged can't testify in this hyar (hic!) court."

"Well, then, coroner, I'm afraid I can't produce any better witness. No one here saw the deceased receive the fatal blow. I believe there may have been a witness to it, however."

"Who was it?" asked the coroner. "The witness ain't here, (hic!) so—"

"Yes, she is!"

Loud and clear above the hoarse voices of the men arose the tones of a young girl.

"Kitten!" cried half a dozen of the miners in chorus.

It was Kitten, drenched with rain, her clothes hanging about her in strips, one of her shoes gone, and her whole appearance showing that she had undergone both physical and mental strain, but resolution to have justice done imprinted in every feature of her pretty face.

"The witness is here!" she cried, "and that man didn't die by the drummer's hand! He didn't die by any mortal hand!" she added, pointing solemnly at the rigid form of Leonard Bolton on the rickety table.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE END OF THE TRAIL.

For a moment every one was too much surprised at the sudden appearance of Kitten, to utter a word.

Even Peachblossom, though he knew that Leonard Bolton had been responsible for Kitten's absence, was not prepared for her return at this important moment.

For a brief space he stood, pistols in hand, looking at her. Then, with more emotion than he usually allowed himself to display, he stepped forward, and taking both pistols in his left hand, grasped her little brown hand heartily with his right.

Kitten drew her hand away with a jerk, as she flung an indignant glance at Peachblossom.

"What's the matter, Kitten?" asked the young drummer, scarcely knowing what he said.

"Matter! Well, a feller that 'ud leave a girl ter be grabbed and dragged away by a thing like that thar Quaker Hi without takin' a step to help her, can't be expected to see thar is anything ther matter, I s'pose. But I don't want no sich man aroun' me! I allers thought ez you was a squar' man, Peachblossom, but now—"

Indignant tears welled up into the girl's eyes and choked her voice.

"Kitten!" cried Peachblossom, desperately.

"Order! Silence!" broke in the coroner.

"Who is this (hic!) gal?"

"Why, you know her well enough," said Grute, grinning. "That's my gal, Kitten, my darter!"

"I don't know her (hic!) officially. You ain't a (hic!) lawyer, Grute, or you'd know thet."

"Coroner," and Kitten spoke now in her clear-cut tones—for she had gulped down her tears and was the bright, defiant mountain-girl once more, "coroner, I want you to hear me. I know this hyar drummer, Peachblossom, is innocent of the murder, because I was with Quaker Hi when he was struck—"

"Struck?" interjected Dan Walker.

"Yes, struck—struck by lightning. That's what killed him, I guess."

"Guess!" said the coroner.

"Yes, guess! He wasn't dead when he left me up in the mountains."

"Wasn't he?" asked the coroner, vacantly. Then, recovering himself, he added quickly: "No, of course he (hic!) warn't! Thet's so!"

The miners who had crowded threateningly around Peachblossom and his two adherents a few minutes before, now came toward Kitten, and were listening with eager interest to the colloquy between herself and the coroner.

"Well, gal," commanded that official, "tell ther Court all about this hyar (hic!) affair."

Though, by jiminy, I don't b'lieve ez it's (hic!) lawful, arter the jury has (hic!) decided who committed the (hic!) murder!"

Thus ordered, Kitten related her adventures with Quaker Hi. How that he had stolen her from her father's home that night while she was looking out of the kitchen window, and had dragged her up the mountain, where he said that he meant to make her promise to marry him before he released her.

"Marry him! The brute!" cried Peachblossom indignantly.

"Lot you'd 'a' cared!" muttered Kitten under her breath—looking pleased, nevertheless.

"Silence in court!" shouted the coroner.

Kitten went on with her narration, and told of herself and Hiram Placid being caught in the storm, and of the stroke of lightning that had deprived her companion of his reason.

Up to this point the reader knows as well as Kitten what befell her and Leonard Bolton, alias Hiram Placid.

Then she told how she had sat quietly crowded against the wall in the rain and wretchedness, with her eyes closed, half asleep. Then she had come to herself, as the rain ceased almost as suddenly as it had commenced, and saw that Hiram Placid had gone. She looked around as well as she could for him, and then made the best of her way home, where she had arrived in time to tell her story at a critical moment for the Drummer Detective.

"Though I don't think much of such a man as he is, anyhow," she added, with feigned contempt.

"Gentlemen," said the coroner, gravely. "You hev heard what ther (hic!) gal says. Air yer willin' ter—ter—(hic!) reconsider up yer (hic!) verdict?"

"We air," answered one of the miner jurymen.

"Wal, go (hic!) ahead an' do it, an' (hic!) mind you git it right this hyar (hic!) time 'cause I'm sort o' tired o' this hyar (hic!) foolishness."

The six jurymen gathered around the body while Peachblossom drew close to the young girl and talked to her earnestly.

Grute, too mad to say anything, stood watching them evilly, but thought it best not to make any hostile demonstration while Dan Walker and Red Bill were so obviously ready to defend the young drummer at a minute's notice.

"We hev decided," said the principal jurymen after two minutes' deliberation.

"Sure?" asked the coroner.

"Sure," was the reply.

"Wal, what is it?"

"Suicide!"

"Good! Thet's jist what I (hic!) thought it wuz!" the coroner averred, much relieved. "Kiver him over, boys, an' we'll bury him ter-day."

"Coroner," now interposed the drummer.

"Thet's all (hic!) right. You're not (hic!) guilty. I never thought yer (hic!) wuz," assured the coroner, taking Peachblossom's hand. "Nat, give us aller drink. My throat's ez (hic!) dusty ez a pair of old shoes."

Grute went sulkily behind the bar and served the liquor; even Peachblossom making a pretense of drinking, though he contrived to empty his liquor on the floor unobserved.

"Coroner," persisted Peachblossom, "if I understand it rightly, you are sheriff of this county, and empowered, under the law, also as Justice of the Peace, to issue warrants of arrest?"

The stout official drew himself up, and responded, with great dignity: "Thet's jist what I am, young (hic!) feller."

"Good! Dan Walker, just stand by that front door, will you? And, Bill, you keep on the other side, near that bedroom!"

Dan Walker and Red Bill promptly took their positions, as requested, while Nat Grute's one eye blazed in indignation, though he did not say anything.

"Now, coroner," went on Peachblossom, "I may as well tell you first of all who I am."

He took from his pocket a paper, sealed and stamped in an official manner, which the coroner, drunk as he was, saw at once was the bearer's credentials as a Chicago detective.

Peachblossom at the same time opened his neat Prince Albert coat and showed on his vest the silver star that he wore as a badge of his official character.

"A (hic!) detective? Why didn't yer tell anyone (hic!) before?"

"Because, one of the first things I learned in my business was to keep my affairs to myself," replied Peachblossom, coolly.

"Good!" acquiesced the coroner, with a wise nod.

"Now, sir, as a Justice of the Peace, I ask you to arrest this man, Nathaniel Grute formerly of Chicago Ill., but now of Slippery Elm, Colorado," said Peachblossom, pointing to the landlord.

The one-eyed landlord of Slippery Elm Hotel, livid with rage, darted around the bar and threw himself upon the smiling young drummer.

For a moment a bowie-knife gleamed in the hand of the infuriated ruffian, as he struck at Peachblossom's back.

The blade would have surely reached the heart of his victim, but for the interposition of Kitten.

Before any one else had divined Grute's intention she had caught his wrist and so turned aside the deadly stroke.

There was a quick struggle, but the girl was powerless in the hands of the sinewy scoundrel, and she would have given her own life in the effort to save that of the drummer had not the latter seized Grute by the throat, and wrenched the knife from his hand.

"Curse you!" hissed the thwarted villain.

There was another movement on the part of the drummer, something glittering, and rattling, and behold Nat Grute's wrists were encircled in a pair of nickel-plated handcuffs.

"Pretty, ain't they?" observed Peachblossom, smiling.

Grute foamed in impotent fury, as, at a signal from the drummer, Red Bill stepped forward, and, pistol in hand, kept guard over the prisoner.

"Wal, young (hic!) feller, you don't seem ter need me ter (hic!) arrest any one."

"I had to act quickly that time," answered the Drummer Detective. "My charges against the said Nathaniel Grute are that he stole certain important papers, including a will, from one Leonard Bolton, of Chicago, known in Slipperm Elm as Hiram Placid, also, that he has unlawfully kept possession of a girl, Kate Vernon, known in Slippery Elm as Kitten Grute, also, that he has attempted to rob and kill myself, Joseph Grattan, of Chicago, known as Peachblossom; also, that he has been guilty of sundry other crimes which I am prepared to prove in due time."

"What did you say about me?" asked Kitten, with wide-open eyes.

"Only that you are really Kate Vernon, daughter of Henri and Kate Vernon, of Chicago, and heiress to an estate worth fully \$100,000 a year."

"Jiminy!" ejaculated the much astonished Kitten. "And, what about Hiram, who you say was robbed by Dad Grute?"

"That miserable and wicked man," answered Peachblossom, "who has aped the manners of a most estimable religious denomination, has gone to his account. Let him rest in peace."

"Good! You're a squar' feller," exclaimed Dan Walker taking Peachblossom's hand and shaking it heartily. "I tie to you every day in the year!"

There is but little more to tell.

In due course Kate Vernon was established in her rights. The roughness of speech and manner that she had acquired during her long residence among the miners of Colorado were easily removed by two years in a private academy in the East.

When she returned to Chicago, at the end of that time, to take up her residence with an old maiden aunt who had supposed the child of her brother dead years ago, it was as a self-possessed and brilliant young lady.

A frequent guest of the maiden aunt was a certain Mr. Joseph Grattan, who, however, Miss Kate Vernon would persist in calling Peachblossom; and when, six months later, the aforesaid Mr. Grattan led her to the hymeneal altar, she called him Peachblossom in church before all the congregation, and declared that she would do so all her life at home. It was as Peachblossom that he had met and first won her heart, and the name was sweeter to her even than 'Joe,' though she thinks that the nicest name a man ever had.

Peachblossom and Kitten—queer names, perhaps, but they are borne by the two happiest people in the whole big city of Chicago.

Nat Grute went to the penitentiary for a long term of years, in expiation of his numerous crimes, and thinks himself lucky to have escaped the hangman.

Pudge was sent to a reform school, where he will stay until he is twenty-one years of age. It is to be hoped that he will be a better man than boy.

Red Bill reformed entirely, and is now a really valued member of the Chicago Detective Bureau, with which Peachblossom is still connected.

Dan Walker is still in Colorado. He loves the free, wild life of the Far West, and would rather feel the mountain air blowing across his face than breathe the scented air of the most luxurious *salon* in an Eastern city.

Peachblossom and Kitten sometimes sigh for a week or two in the shadow of the Rockies, and often talk of taking a trip to the mining-camp that last saw them as Kitten, the untutored child of nature, and Peachblossom, the Drummer Detective.

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